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Working with the Wisdom of the Congregation, Theology, Learning and Organizing in the Local Church

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the
University of Chester
for the degree of
Professional Doctor of Practical Theology
by Richard Impey

May 2013

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Abstract

Working with the wisdom of the congregation, Theology, Learning and Organizing in the Local Church

This thesis contends that a pattern of training entitled Parish Development devised by the author in the course of his professional role as a training officer in the Church of England is a new, versatile and valuable training resource for training and development in the Church of England (and potentially for other churches too.)

This pattern of training engages with the congregation as a whole, unlike traditional training methods which focus on the individual who is being prepared for, or supported in, a leadership role within and on behalf of the local church. Parish Development enables a congregation to discover important aspects of its own wisdom by constructing an account of its story, size, purposes, outlook, stage on a life cycle and shared values in belonging to this particular congregation. The resulting account will have implications for the way the congregation *organizes* its life and activities which usually imply that some improving or developmental action can be taken. The account is also relevant to several issues facing congregations both in the normal course of change, like the appointment and induction of a new vicar, or in more substantial change like merging with another parish or sharing clergy.

This new pattern of training has been constructed from insights to be found in Congregational Studies and turned into exercises designed to enhance the self understanding of the congregation as a whole. It employs a pedagogy which draws inspiration from Freire, Vella and Wickett in focussing on dialogue and conversation designed to reveal the wisdom already present within the congregation and to build on that. The notion of the wisdom of the congregation has roots in Aristotle's use of *phronesis*, a concept familiar to practical theologians through the writings of Browning and Graham, but just as importantly, it makes sense to congregational members themselves.

The theological purpose driving this pattern of training is the desire to build up the local church as the body of Christ. This accords with the congregation as *koinonia*, an important ecumenical understanding of the church, which is always in need of *oikodome* or building up.

The research interprets data about the impact of this training on four selected case studies. The data consists of locally published reports of the training events, interviews with participants looking back on what happened, and the results of a questionnaire designed to explore the status of contrasting accounts. It also uses eight metaphors for organizations identified by Morgan to provide further insights into the complexity of what is happening. The method is shown to be versatile enough to respond positively to difficult decisions and changes in parish life. It harnesses a hitherto largely ignored resource to explore and contribute to solving significant problems facing the contemporary church.

To demonstrate its implementable validity the thesis concludes with a practical proposal for employing this method to address the challenge of declining clergy numbers. An Appendix offers a theological commentary on Parish Development showing that this proposal is in line with contemporary Anglican ecclesiology.

Preface

I wish first to record my thanks to my principal supervisor, the Reverend Doctor Chris Baker, for his guidance and encouragement, and to Professor Elaine Graham and all who have set up and staffed the Professional Doctoral Programme. It has been a privilege to take part in this new venture. I also wish to record my thanks to my fellow students who have stimulated and supported me as we journeyed together through the adventure of researching our own professional practice.

My guide for spelling, capitalization and other matters related to the presentation of words in this thesis is *New Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Whenever this dictionary provides alternative spellings the first provision is chosen; in particular this means using the ending -ize rather than -ise on most occasions.

Greek words are transliterated and italicized.

Latin words are italicized.

All quotations follow the spelling and capitalization of the original. An English translation of quotations from German texts is provided as a footnote.

I use the APA Referencing Style as set out in the University of Chester Learning and Information Services document updated January 2009.

The label Parish Development (capitalized) is used to refer specifically to the pattern of training I have devised (this is most conveniently defined as the content of my *Workbook* (Impey, 2009b)); parish development (lower case) refers generally to the development of a parish. The phrase *working with the wisdom of the congregation* (italicized) is used in close association with Parish Development to emphasize the nature of this pattern of training.

The words 'parish' and local church' are used to refer to a functioning unit of church as understood in the Church of England, regardless of whether it is a united benefice or a single parish. All incumbents and priests in charge are referred to as 'vicar' regardless of their actual title. By 'congregation' I mean the people who regard themselves as members of the local church; I do not try to define the congregation with any precision, either numerically or with criteria for membership. I take the view that those who participate in the Parish Development training sessions represent the larger congregation adequately for most practical purposes (provided that everyone has been invited). I deliberately use the grammatically inconsistent 'they' as a third person singular to minimize the identification of individuals.

Introduction

Working with the wisdom of the congregation

This thesis presents evidence for the claim that the pattern of training which I call Parish Development, characterized by *working with the wisdom of the congregation*, is an enhanced training tool which is a new, versatile and valuable resource for training and development in the Church of England (and potentially for other churches too.)

How this pattern of training arose

The thesis arises within the context of my professional role as a training officer in the Church of England. I have been ordained for over forty years, and for most of that time I have been officially involved in some kind of training role. I began in 1972 as 'The Bishop's Chaplain for the In-Service Training of Clergy' in the Diocese of Bath and Wells, a title that was soon changed to 'Director of Training for Clergy and Ordinands.' In 1979 I became Vicar of St John's Church in the centre of Blackpool which included playing a part in the training of curates, and of lay people, in the Diocese of Blackburn. From 1995 until 2000 I was Director of Training in the Diocese of Norwich, followed by eighteen months as an Interim Vicar in a Norwich parish (a post consciously designed as a training role for that parish). From 2004 until my retirement in 2010 I was Bishop's Adviser for Parish Development in the Diocese of Sheffield.

During my time at Norwich I began to develop this pattern of training as a new resource to add to the repertoire of the training team in the diocese. It is new in that it focusses on the congregation as a whole rather than on the work of clergy or leadership teams. It begins with an attempt to make explicit the wisdom embedded in the practices and opinions of all the members of the congregation. It encourages and enables every member to participate on an equal basis. Implicit questions, as the process proceeds, include 'Is our practical wisdom wise enough?' 'Are our assumptions and habits appropriate for what we want to be, and what we want to achieve?'

It has proved versatile, capable of being delivered in several different contexts. It has been employed as the basis for 'Training the new Vicar;' for identifying important issues in matching clergy to parishes (the appointment of incumbents), and parishes with parishes (in plans for grouping or uniting parishes); it has provided guidance and mediation in the process of making difficult decisions, and it has provided a valuable starting point for a congregation addressing the question of appropriate development.

The thesis is an example of Action Research in Practical Theology

Subjecting this pattern of training to the disciplined reflection of a Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology has enabled me to recognize and treat this practice as a form of Action Research. My argument in support of the thesis will be that research shows it to be a pattern of training which is practical and valuable. It is practical because it is relatively easy to deliver and makes sense to those who engage with it, and it is valuable because it has produced important results for the development of parishes.

The theological values which are implicit in this pattern of training are grounded in a contemporary ecumenical understanding of the nature and mission of the church as *koinonia* (fellowship, communion, sharing.) Explicit theology includes the conviction that love for God and love for neighbour cannot be separated (as in 1 John 4.20), and that it is the shared responsibility of all Christians to build up (*oikodome*, develop) the body of Christ, the church (see for example, Matthew 16.18; Romans 14.19 and 1 Corinthians 10.23). It draws generally on the wisdom tradition within Scripture.

The educational methods it employs include working with the assumption that in a Christian community everyone has things to offer as well as things to receive; that a shared wisdom is there to be discovered, and once discovered and articulated, to be developed; that this is a shared enterprise in which all can be involved; and that many important things about values and assumptions are learned *indirectly*, that is to say by a growth of self awareness rather than as the result of a direct communication from a teacher. The great value of this kind of learning is that it happens at exactly the place where it is most relevant and most appropriate.

Much of the learning involved in these processes leading to the articulation of a shared practical wisdom is made possible by the way the training is *organized*. An important part of what is discovered concerns the significant role that different patterns of *organizing what we do* in congregations and in dioceses, affects what happens.

These three, the theology, the learning and the organizing, relate to each other in important ways. Doing theology needs learning and organizing. Learning needs organizing and has an implicit theology. Organizing will reveal theological values and needs learning. It is the wisdom of the congregation which integrates and holds the three in balance, as illustrated in Figure 1



Figure 1 Wisdom holds theology, learning and organizing in balance

The shape of the argument

The Thesis is presented with the following framework:

Chapter One places the thesis within the discipline of Practical Theology, paying particular attention to recent intellectual changes, to the nature of action research and to the wider context of congregational studies which is the most obvious category for this thesis within Practical Theology.

Chapter Two focusses on the origin and nature of Parish Development as a training resource. The pattern of training is described in detail and a summary of three reports is provided.

Chapter Three addresses the theoretical concepts which play a role in Parish Development. The aim of enabling organizational learning is examined, the central notion of practical wisdom is discussed and the eight metaphors for organizations are described because they are used as one of the major theoretical lenses for understanding the complex range of possible perspectives for assessing the results of Parish Development interventions. Chapter Four explains the research methodology employed in gathering and assessing the data in a way that is appropriate to the kind of learning that happens as a result of *working with the wisdom of the congregation*. The theological purpose behind Parish Development is restated and the theological and pedagogical values that are implicit in the practice are explained. The ethical considerations of research are related to the ethics of the training method itself. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the choice of four case studies to illustrate the method and to substantiate the thesis.

Chapter Five reports on the research data and its interpretation. This is in four main sections. The first presents the evidence for what the congregations have learned based on the reports produced at the time. The second reports on the opinions of the participants as they reflect on the impact of the training. The third section describes the results of a questionnaire designed to indicate the different status of stories of 'what happened' written from contrasting perspectives. These first three sections focus on what the congregations have learned. The fourth section uses the eight metaphors to provide yet more perspectives on what happened which have implications for the diocese (which I represent as a trainer) as it relates to congregations.

The sixth and final chapter seeks to set out the implications of this research for the thesis by summarizing its implications for the congregations, for myself as trainer and researcher, and for the diocese in its aim of supporting parishes. The chapter concludes with a demonstration of the *implementable validity of the thesis* in the form of a serious proposal for the application of these training methods to a central challenge facing the Church of England.

Claim to originality

My claim to originality in presenting this thesis lies principally in the synthesis I have made of other people's ideas, resulting in a new approach to training in local churches. There are five strands to this synthesis running through the thesis:

1 is the concept of Organizational Learning, which has for me a nice ambiguity. First, when applied to congregations, it shifts the emphasis from the learning of the individual to the learning of the community, which is also shifting emphasis from teaching to learning (Dixon 1994, Easterby-Smith, Burgoyne and Araujo 1999, and Hawkins, 1997). But second, it is learning about how we *organize* what we do, a hitherto neglected topic in diocesan training practice.

2 is the practical use I have made of several people's ideas in presenting a number of exercises for congregations which enable them to recognize some of the assumptions they share which affect their life together. This includes the development of a typology of purpose which I believe to be original in itself as well as very valuable for the self awareness of a congregation. (The roots of this typology are acknowledged in some detail in Impey 2010; the most important are Hopewell 1987, Becker 1999, Handy 1988, Lovell 1994, and Grundy 1998).

3 is the conscious weaving into this approach of educational values and methods I have learned from others, especially Freire (1972) Vella (1995) and Wickett (1998).

4 is the use I have made of different metaphors of organization, as presented by Gareth Morgan (2006) in the analysis of the data.

5 is the use I make of the concept of wisdom as an integrating notion capable of holding together the many other concepts and factors involved in trying to understand the complexity of local churches. (Especially Kessler and Bailey (2007), but also Ford (2007).)

The thesis as a whole will show how these claims are justified, but I offer two related observations at this point. The first concerns the shift away from the learning of the individual to the learning of the congregation. This I believe can be described as an example of what Argyris and Schoen call 'double-loop learning' (Argyris and Schoen 1978) and Kuhn calls a paradigm shift

(Kuhn 1996); a change which amounts to a radical revision of the assumptions which constitute the starting point for action and understanding. I think that I am taking part in such a shift, initiating it in a good number of local churches, contributing to what may eventually become a wholesome change in education and training in churches, but which at the moment is far from complete. Paradigm shifts and double loop learning are often presented as if they were sudden eureka-type moments; they may be for individuals, but for communities they are more often long drawn out affairs, meeting resistance and welcome in almost equal measure. I see such a shift as part of a larger movement toward the democratization of learning and the recognition of the value of sharing life in community. Theologically this sharing reflects the biblical concept of *koinonia*, which a Faith and Order Paper of the World Council of Churches describes as 'central in the quest for a common understanding of the nature of the Church and its visible unity.' This paper offers the English words communion, participation, fellowship, and sharing as indicative of the meaning of *koinonia*. (Faith and Order 2005)

The second point concerns Wisdom, an elusive but very useful concept to employ in this kind of training. I do not claim to be especially wise, nor to be the first to employ the concept, but I believe that the way I use it in this context is original. For example, one of the small but important ways in which 'wisdom' as I employ it can be integrative is that it enables participants involved in the training process to sidestep the distinction between lay and ordained. This move enables both groups to think together in a fresh way, without assuming that the clergy are basically the 'teachers' and the laity are invariably 'pupils.' This is something that politically I feel best not to stress (to do so raises unnecessary defensiveness) but which is nevertheless practically and theologically significant.

Chapter 1

Working with the wisdom of the congregation as a contemporary example of Practical Theology

The kind of training which is delivered within dioceses and local churches is a form of training in Practical Theology. Many dioceses now regard training as part of their parish support services which is entirely appropriate. Parish Development is a new departure designed specifically to support the parish as a whole by focussing on the congregation rather than on individuals like clergy or other authorized ministers. It is not meant to replace the necessary training of individuals, but to complement it. It does this by focussing on the nature of congregations which are inevitably a significant part of the context in which authorized ministry is exercised. But rather than attempting to describe congregations in general, it sets out to enable a particular congregation in its particular circumstances to produce its own understanding of itself. This accords with important contemporary changes in the intellectual world about what it means to understand.

Intellectual change, and what it means ‘to understand’

One of the most insightful and convenient summaries of what these changes mean is provided by Stephen Toulmin (1990) He highlights four major changes in the priorities of the intellectual world in recent decades under the heading of *The Recovery of Practical Philosophy* (p186). They are moves

from the Written to the Oral

from the Universal to the Particular

from the General to the Local

from the Timeless to the Timely.

These moves, he argues, are a reversal of changes made in the early seventeenth century, associated in particular with Descartes, Isaac Newton and the rise of scientific method, but importantly for Toulmin, also closely associated with the considerable anxiety and uncertainty occasioned by the religious conflicts in Europe which led to the Thirty Years War. Toulmin argues that modernity - the assumptions and methods which have dominated from the time of Descartes until recently - was not just about scientific method; it was also an attempt to deal with this kind of anxiety. Although Toulmin does not explicitly use the term wisdom he makes it clear that he sees philosophy as the love of wisdom in a broad sense, and not as an abstruse academic subject. I shall have occasion to refer to these major changes at several places in what follows.

Several kinds of research contribute to understanding

The academy recognizes several distinct kinds of research which are appropriate for advancing the understanding of professional practice. The main categories are Quantitative, Qualitative and Action Research, each of which overlap to some extent with each other, and also contain a range of variations.

Quantitative research

Quantitative research focusses on what can be measured in a numerical way, and uses statistical criteria to judge the success or otherwise of certain policies. If Parish Development had become a widespread training practice, it

might be possible to measure its effectiveness in terms of the numerical growth of participating congregations compared with that of non participating congregations. But quite apart from having to make allowance for the effect of non training factors, and other difficulties, that kind of research is not appropriate for Parish Development at present, given the modest scale of its use.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research seeks to identify improvements in the quality of what is happening which a particular practice makes possible. This is usually assessed by careful observation, including questioning through interviews, focus groups and questionnaires, and sometimes through 'participant observation.' Although my involvement as a trainer was certainly participation of a kind, I did not set out to participate in, or observe, what might be described as the ordinary life of those congregations. Harriet Mowat in seminars, as well as in the book she wrote with John Swinton, helped me see how 'the primary tool of the qualitative researcher is herself.' (Swinton and Mowat 2006 p58.) A page or two later they use the term 'co-creator' of the qualitative researcher in human situations. My engagement with Gareth Morgan in particular enabled me to recognize that the assumptions (embedded in metaphors) which dominated my perception of what was happening contributed in a decisive way to what the congregation and I co-created. My response to this realization was deliberately to avoid giving undue prominence to one account, as if there was one right answer, by supplying several accounts from different perspectives (based on different metaphors.) It was then for the *wisdom of the congregation* to hold these contrasting accounts in some kind of balance.

Action research

Action research, which Swinton and Mowat describe as a significant form of qualitative research, places the emphasis on a shared enquiry (research) with the purpose of improving the current practice of an organization. Danny Burns relates Action research particularly to the understanding of organizations as complex systems (Burns 2007); David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick place a valuable emphasis on what is involved in researching an

organization to which the researcher already belongs (Coghlan and Brannick 2010). Danny Burns provides instances of 'improvements' or policies which are valuable in one part of an organization (a subsystem), which are nevertheless detrimental to the organization or system as a whole. A medical example he gives concerns the catheterization of elderly patients, which saves nurses time on the ward, but contributes directly to 'bed blocking', since a such a patient cannot be immediately sent home once the initial problem has been dealt with (Burns 2007 p23). This is a systems failure, a 'foolishness' built into practice at a point which seemed wise but whose consequences are not. Chris Argyris pursues this kind of foolishness by identifying the defensive mechanisms at work, especially, he says, in hierarchical organizations, which effectively build a foolishness into the system as 'skilled unawareness,' blocking possibilities of learning (Argyris 2004.) The assertion 'We have always done it this way' is often a sign of this 'skilled unawareness.'

The position of a diocesan officer in a training relationship with a congregation is ambiguous as far as 'my own organization' is concerned. (Coghlan and Brannick's book is entitled *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization*.) I am a member of the wider organization, the diocese, but not a member of this particular congregation. My training practice is primarily concerned to 'build up' the congregation (which can be regarded as a system in its own right as well as being a subsystem within the diocese), but in an important secondary sense it is also about building up the diocese (the larger system.) Research may discover important things for the diocese as well as for the congregations. One of the difficulties facing dioceses wanting to become learning organizations is the loose structure holding together those who work at diocesan level. It consists of a whole number of individuals at middle management level, working more or less independently at their different tasks, uncoordinated and relatively unsupervised unless things go wrong. The senior staff of a diocese may work more consciously together as a team, but since much of what they do is confidential, this team work is either not visible to, or especially supportive of, the junior or ordinary staff. So what is 'the diocese' that it could learn? The congregation with everyone invited can gather as a whole in order to learn. Those who work for the

diocese are not yet used to gathering together in this kind of way, and its hierarchical structure does not help. Not all Bishops stand on their dignity, but most people have a natural reluctance to offer their Bishop advice or criticism, even when invited to do so. The most valuable advice and criticism will be directed at the system and not the person, but in a hierarchical organization it is difficult to sustain that distinction. These remarks are not intended to be an excuse or a criticism; they describe my perception of the nature of my different roles as a training officer over against congregations, who I am expected to train, and the diocese, which does not expect me to offer it any training or special insight.

The experience of publishing and research

The experience of publishing has influenced my understanding of Action Research: the doctoral program encourages participants to publish articles and reviews, and specifically to produce a Publishable Article. Although my publishable article has not been published I have produced a number of book reviews and articles, and two books. It is relevant to report on two of these publishing experiences as examples of my own learning as it relates to Action Research.

In October 2007 the *Church Times* published an article of mine about the value of Interim Ministry for parishes that had suffered some kind of trauma or who were experiencing significant change (Impey 2007.) The article was well received and attracted some correspondence, both directly to me, and in the pages of the *Church Times*. But in many ways the most significant response came from a commissioning editor at SPCK inviting me to contribute to their Library of Ministry. The eventual outcome was *How to develop your local church, Working with the wisdom of the congregation* (Impey 2010). The discipline of explaining what Parish Development involved, where the ideas had come from and the kind of insights it made possible was important for clarifying my own understanding of what is involved in this approach to training. The publishers decided that it should be a stand alone book rather than part of the Library of Ministry, and they chose the title on the grounds that my choice (the subtitle) would not be followed up by people searching book lists for this kind of material. Both these

publications were written for what Coghlan and Brannick describe as 'second person audiences'; as a practical theologian I feel that communicating with congregations, with ordinary church members, is my primary responsibility. But at the same time I have a responsibility to ensure as far as I can that this 'popular material' has an integrity and validity, and is not merely a 'popular' version of my convictions and guesses.

The second experience of publishing followed my giving a short paper in the parallel sessions to a conference on Professional Wisdom held at Edinburgh University in the spring of 2008. The eventual article was entitled *Towards Professional Wisdom in Parish Ministry* and was published in the journal *Ethics and Social Welfare* in July 2009, a special issue whose guest editors were the promoters of the original conference. As I recall, the editors were keen to have my contribution because

- (a) there were few papers about ministry, and
- (b) it was more practical, less theoretical than the majority. The paper focussed on a process for wise appointments by matching clergy and parishes using Parish Development methods. It was subject to peer review; the reviews described my paper as interesting, but neither conceptually rigorous (I had mentioned Aristotle, but not obviously engaged with Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*) nor based on accessible empirical research. I admitted both criticisms, but the editors were happy to publish after a few alterations. I think the paper would count as a satisfactory 'second person voice'; the kind of presentation I would be happy to make to a Deanery Synod or similar church gathering. It was not satisfactory as 'third person voice', addressed to a critical audience who wanted to see a rigorous version of my reasoning and my evidence. The experience points up the contrast between what I am used to doing as a trainer, and what is ideally required of a researcher.

Implications for researching my own praxis

There are several things to discuss at this stage about researching my praxis as an example of action research. One group of topics concerns the peculiarities of my praxis; the other concerns the ethics of research.

The peculiarities of my praxis

Every praxis will have its own peculiarities. Mine includes the basic challenge of assessing the impact of one contribution to the development of a parish while other contributions are being made at the same time over which I have no control, and often, little or no knowledge. Another is the basic problem that everything is unique and one off, for once an intervention of any significance has been made, it cannot be unmade. These are not reversible or repeatable experiments. What might have happened had the intervention not been made can only be the subject of speculation. But it is possible to speculate responsibly in the light of experience, rather than provide wild speculations that are primarily designed to put the intervention in a good light (or a bad one, if the speculator is opposed to the process.) But then all participation in life has these features.

The ethics of interventions

What can be constant in all this is the *intention of the intervention*. In that respect the ethics of training and research is not just a matter of obtaining consent, protecting anonymity and interpreting data with integrity; it is fundamental to the whole enterprise. What can often be discerned within the life of congregations are the typical consequences of certain types of intervention which enable a judgment to be made about whether they tend to be more beneficial than harmful, or vice versa.

The aim of Parish Development is to help local churches learn to be better churches and to build up the body of Christ. There is clear reference to the centrality of 'loving God and loving the neighbour' and reflection on what that will mean for the congregation is a major part of what we seek to learn together.¹ So much is explicit, but there are important ethical values which are also implicit in the methods used: for example, the assumption that everyone has something to offer as well as something to learn in this process. A way of involving and giving a voice to as many members of a congregation as possible has been developed in order to enable everyone to give as well as receive as part of the learning process. This method enables

¹ An example of how this is spelled out is to be found in Impey 2009 p24

shared, or at least majority, opinions to emerge in a way which is often a discovery for all concerned. This does not ignore the important role of dominant people in congregations, but it gives everyone an opportunity to pay attention to significant opinions which may not otherwise have been noticed. It amounts to a democratization of learning which is also a mature kind of learning. In the terms of a simple transactional analysis it is an Adult-Adult transaction, rather than a Parent-Child one (Bernes 1964.) Because the questions that members of a congregation are invited to answer are general questions, not associated with the known or guessed-at opinions of leaders, any bias to answer in ways that support or oppose a leader is not obviously present.²

By using such a democratic method it is not a matter of taking sides, as if it were favouring the voiceless over against the articulate: the process supports everyone in trying to discover together what is the case. And this move is strengthened by focussing attention on what is appropriate *organizing* for the purposes identified in the particular circumstances of that congregation. *Organizing* is for most people an unfamiliar, though readily recognizable, theme. Everyone is potentially on a more equal footing, when discussing organizing, which is not the case if the focus were on theology, where clergy are presumed to have a clear advantage.

In this way the central ethical value underlying this training practice is basically a respect for every member of a congregation, a way of expressing what it means to love our neighbour as ourselves, or, to put it another way, is of the essence of the kind of community (*koinonia*) a Christian congregation should aspire to be. Members are entitled to be heard and to engage in the discussions and disputes which shape a congregation and its future. This does not mean the right to have their own way, but the right to engage in the mutual discipline of thinking and working and deciding together about the

² The pressure to answer questions in ways that please important people, or which avoid offending those for whom we have a genuine affection, or which enable us to oppose folk we dislike is subtle and strong. When this kind of pressure is blatant we call it intimidation; its more inconspicuous forms are hardly less damaging to communities. "...[I]t is my contention that the inability to cope with (manage) agreement, rather than the inability to cope with (manage) conflict, is the single most pressing issue of modern organizations." (Harvey, 1988. p17).

nature of the congregation they belong to. All this happens as a shared interpretation of the Christian faith (not as a struggle for personal preferences to prevail) for the congregation embodies, for better or worse, a shared understanding of the gospel.

Judgments about the value of the interventions themselves will need to wait for evidence which will be presented in chapter five.

Congregational Studies and *working with the wisdom of the congregation*

Some of the most significant features of contemporary congregational studies (discussed in detail in my Literature Review) have been built into Parish Development methods as mentioned in the section 'Claims to Originality' above, and as set out in more detail when I describe the Parish Development toolkit in chapter two. There are some parallels with material to be found in the *Handbooks* edited by Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney (1998) and by Cameron, Richter, and Ward, (2005), for example, and especially in *Understanding Congregations* by Malcolm Grundy (1998), but in Parish Development I have changed the perspective from that of an observer to that of an aware participant, and also from the perspective of an individual to the shared perspective of the congregation as a whole. As will be clear when I explain the rationale of the questions at the heart of Parish Development the 'shared perspective of the congregation' is another way of describing the *wisdom of the congregation*.

This wisdom is a construct, for Parish Development enables a congregation to construct it in a way that is clear and open - everyone can see how it is constructed, indeed can see the part they themselves play in its construction. When it is so constructed it can be engaged with and regularly be deconstructed and reconstructed by those to whom it belongs, for it is an attempt at articulating who they are. Such reconstructions do not happen in an arbitrary way; they come about through dialogue and negotiation, both with each other, and with significant 'others' including most often the diocese. In this way the *understanding* which is central to the enterprise of congregational studies is relocated from the observer to the participants who

share in a community, *koinonia*, which has a wisdom, a self understanding, distinct from that of an observer as well as from that of any of the individuals who together make up the congregation.

Chapter 2

Parish Development as a new training resource for dioceses

This chapter describes the origins of this form of training before providing a detailed description of its methods and examples of the kind of learning it makes possible.

The origins of Parish Development

Part of the reason I was appointed as the very first Bishop's Chaplain for In-Service Training in the diocese of Bath and Wells in 1972, I was told subsequently, was because I said in interview that I had no preconceived plan for clergy in-service training, but intended to ask the clergy what they felt they needed. Constructing and planning action on this basis was relatively straightforward: I visited clergy, mostly in deanery chapters, and asked them what they wanted; the first answer was something I had not expected - they asked for help in dealing with death. So I planned a course which included reading together books that discussed death and dying, inviting doctors, nurses and undertakers to talk to us about their roles, and how they saw our role as priests, and engaging together in Bible study. I ran several versions of

the course for eight to twelve participants in different parts of the large diocese, usually meeting in someones vicarage. Evaluating what happened in retrospect we noted that attendance was good, and the informality of the course was part of its strength. Relationships with one another developed because we shared experiences and learned from each other (most clergy meetings were generally about 'business' or on a social basis.) Relationships with undertakers and the medical profession at the local level also improved. We learned that asking such folk to help in this kind of way was something of a compliment to them as well as a help to us.

In addition clergy became used to being asked what they wanted and were ready to answer; in consequence there were courses on preaching and the pastoral care of the elderly, leading liturgy (it was a time of considerable liturgical change) and also about chairing meetings, and time management.

One contra example stands out: with an experienced colleague I attempted to put on a short residential course about management and working with other people. It was a version of a training course that business people paid a great deal to attend, but we had it at a bargain rate. It seemed such value for money that we grasped the opportunity and failed to ask the clergy whether it was the kind of thing they would appreciate. It wasn't. Evaluating the action I came to see that even though the course was potentially valuable, most of the clergy were not ready to benefit from it. Not only do courses need to be good in themselves, they have to be appropriate and timely for the customers.

My move to Blackpool, and the learning involved in being an Incumbent, had several characteristics. One of the most significant was the realization that I was joining a congregation that was already in the middle of a whole lot of things, with a pattern of values and behaviour that I was expected to join in with and to endorse. Almost inevitably I joined the congregation with a whole number of ideas for improvements that were not welcome. What seemed to me to be constructive proposals were seen by them as an implicit criticism of what they were already doing.

Another important part of my learning as a vicar was triggered by mild panic when the government offered the youth project I chaired half a million pounds to set up a Housing Association as a halfway house for homeless youngsters. I realized that not only had I some responsibility for this £500,000, there was also an annual budget of £350,000 for the church school under changed legislation which had just devolved responsibility from the Local Education Authority to Governors, (as the vicar I was Chair of Governors), and about £60,000 *per annum* for the church budget (when we really needed about £100,000). I had no training or experience in managing such sums of money. I was able to persuade the diocese to sponsor me for The Open University Business School courses beginning with Managing Voluntary and Non-Profit Organizations. This pattern of education required 'direct engagement with your own organization' and not only provided me with some confidence in managing money, but also provided valuable insight into many other management issues.

In addition to these local examples of personal learning two other factors must be mentioned:

One is the steady decline in the number of regular worshippers, and in the number of clergy, so that that some congregations were appearing increasingly unviable while parishes that had been used to having a vicar of their own had now to learn to share clergy.

The other is the increasing regulation and definition of what constitutes acceptable training for authorized ministry in the Church of England.

The context of declining numbers

In the first decade of this century the decline in the number of clergy has presented some pressing problems. The challenge is being met with a number of policies some of which have in fact been employed for a long time. The difference now is that what was 'extraordinary' half a century ago is becoming normal now. Smaller parishes are combined, or staffed by retired clergy who accept a 'house for duty.' Serious attempts are being made to recruit more Self Supporting Ministers (SSM's), though they often turn out to have minds of their own and don't always or often fit easily into supporting

conventional parish ministry. The full-time, professional, stipendiary clergy (it is hard to know which of these labels to stress) are encouraged to oversee work they might formerly have done themselves, supporting SSMs, retired clergy, authorized lay people and other volunteers who do much of the hands on work. So full time ordained ministry is currently being professionalized in the direction of oversight and supervision. The training response to declining numbers and increasing workloads for clergy is to train them in the skills of oversight, and the development of shared or collaborative ministry.

The context of new demands on clergy

Soon after I moved from the training post in Bath and Wells to take on parish based ministry in 1979, trainers were encouraged to work with a centrally compiled list of desired competences for clergy, and steadily since then higher, or at least new, demands are regularly made on those who are recruited - extra degrees or degree like qualifications, professional codes of conduct and Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks, ministerial appraisal schemes, and some changes in the terms of employment. These are all designed to improve standards and to equip clergy for ministry in the twenty first century. When I was involved in clergy training in Somerset in the 1970's I was free to ask the clergy what they wanted in the way of training, and then do my best to provide it. For the Post Ordination Training of curates (POT) I *required* the curates to design their training program, and they did so responsibly. Today those responsible for CME 1-4, as POT is now called (Continuing Ministerial Education Years 1 - 4) do not have that freedom, but are required to see that a list of prescribed topics is properly covered. An increase in required training has diminished the place of self directed education.

An implicit critique of these contextual trends

A critique of these trends is implicit in *working with the wisdom of the congregation*. I do not usually choose to make explicit criticism of what is happening because that often leads to a confrontation which I regard as unnecessary, preferring to undermine the *status quo* by offering an alternative rather than to attack it directly. I have more to say about direct and

indirect communication elsewhere, but in order to make my thinking at this point as plain as possible I offer these observations:

The profound changes that the Church of England is facing due to declining numbers, and especially declining numbers of clergy, need educational and training resources if they are to be managed well. They are not simply administrative changes, and do not affect only the clergy. Members of congregations deserve to be involved in learning about the needs and possibilities that face their local church, and also in contributing to practical solutions; my experience as a trainer has shown me that they are very likely to respond positively if they are invited to play a part from the beginning in discovering the best way forward. Ignoring the contribution that members of congregations can provide in helping to meet these challenges is to overlook a valuable resource.

The development of Parish Development as a new pattern of training

Against this background, and especially during the five years I spent as Director of Training in Norwich Diocese I produced the pattern of training I call Parish Development as a method of *working with the wisdom of the congregation*. I will describe Parish Development training in some detail in a moment but first there are some things to report about the the immediate context in which it was produced. When I arrived in Norwich I inherited:

- an excellent pattern of (predominantly lay) training which was resourced by Course Books and facilitated by part time training officers and other voluntary trainers, drawn from local clergy and lay teachers
- the beginning of an Ordained Local Ministry (OLM) scheme, designed and headed up by a colleague, but which drew heavily on these courses, as well as on the area scheme for the non-residential training of ordinands, the East Anglian Ministerial Training Course (EAMTC)
- well established patterns of Continuing Ministerial Education (CME) for clergy and CME (years) 1-4 for curates which I was expected to revitalize because they were felt to be lacking in some undefined way
- a staff of very competent part time training officers whose other job was incumbent of a parish
- a budget which was frozen for two years, and a departmental financial structure that was far from clear. (The lack of clarity obtained for most of

the year: money was spent on the basis of 'same as last time,' with a careful calculation made only at the end of November so that the training department could spend everything that was left before the years end)

- a national context in which the government was promoting a generous scheme for the financial support of accredited training of all kinds.

I am not going to give a detailed account of everything that happened, except as it provided a context of busy and often frustrating activity during which I tried to introduce this new, congregation based, pattern of training. Why did I want to do this?

I believe that there were several reasons which gave impetus to this idea, (not all of which I might have been able to express very well at the time). I mention five:

1 One was the realization that diocesan support services were uncoordinated: a parish might call on the children's officer, the youth worker, ask for some training courses, have the curate and vicar take part in diocesan or national training events, and call in the diocesan missionary. Although most of these officers worked from the same building we generally only learned of the others involvement by accident, and never looked for an opportunity to develop a shared support strategy. I made an attempt early on in my time in Norwich to raise this, and the idea of coordination met with some enthusiasm. Between us we reckoned that there were several lively parishes which drew on diocesan services a great deal, some that did so occasionally, and many that we had no contact with at all. Because no one kept a comprehensive record no one knew what the overall position was, so there was no strategy for involving parishes or even finding out whether the non-players needed help. Simply responding to demand kept us all very busy.

2 A second reason was a sense that some CME for clergy - especially the more expensive courses - could be seriously counterproductive, at least from the standpoint of their parishes. What happened in these cases was that the

vicar returned from such a course with a clear idea of what was needed to revitalize the parish, only to discover that the congregation - at least as represented by the PCC - did not share either the vicar's vision or enthusiasm, so that instead of real progress being made, a degree of alienation set in. Several of the more expensive courses (I think particularly of those at St George's College, Windsor) were widely regarded as preparation for senior appointments, rather than being for the benefit of the current parish. This in itself contributed to at least a mild alienation - the production of a set of able clergy whose real commitment was to the *next appointment*, which was expected to be more important than the present one.

3 Another reason, (which I would not have been able to articulate in 1995 in the way I now do because my reading for research has enabled me, I believe, to see things more clearly,) concerns the nature of the local church. The local church is the Body of Christ in a particular place, a fellowship of God's people called to worship and serve God. This fellowship (*koinonia*) is an embodiment of the Gospel. The basic invitation is to join in, and by joining in, to discover both the joys and pains of a community of faith and love. The giving and receiving of love which is at the heart of God, and of the Christian community, is something that is constantly being learned and relearned by the community and its members because it is something we never master. The Body of Christ is always in the process of being built (the *oikodome* of the New Testament; the *semper reformanda* of the Reformation). This process of building and rebuilding is the responsibility of all the members, which raises the question of what role does everyone play, including what is the appropriate role for the clergy. The unthinking answer that seemed to dominate everyone's assumptions was that the clergy should do, or control, almost everything, certainly everything of any importance. The notion of a totally or largely clergy-dependent church worries me. This leads on to two closely related matters:

4 There is an essential mutuality involved in any relationship, an important factor which was being naively overlooked in the selection and appointment of clergy. A standard question amounted to 'Are you good at working with

other people?’ The only honest answer, I believe, is that it depends on who I am working with: I have worked very well with some groups, and not at all well with others. If the development of collaborative ministry is a key development for the churches, then its development will paradoxically depend on collaboration from the very start of a relationship. Or, to put it another way, the failure to collaborate, and the difficulties associated with collaboration, constitute a shared predicament.

5 The broad division of training into two major categories: clergy training and lay training, with lay training subdivided into two more divisions - training for authorized offices (Readers, Pastoral Workers, Evangelists etc.) and for distinct roles (PCC Treasurer, Sunday School Teachers etc.) as the first division, with general training for the rest as an obvious second division; this whole pattern reflects a hierarchy of values and assumptions which I believe are inappropriate for the Christian community, implying that the ordained and authorized are our major resource, and that everything is to be organized from the top down. To write such a sentence is to open myself to the criticism of denying the obvious. My basic point is that although the training of clergy and authorized lay people is necessary, it is not sufficient for the healthy development of local churches. That requires the involvement of everyone, which includes the education of the leadership by the membership. I am quite sure that effective leaders in the past, and today, are good at listening to the needs and wishes of those they lead. I am equally sure that how to do this listening has rarely played a part in theological training. Clergy and leaders need the help of lay people, but need to ask for it in ways that are not patronizing or condescending. Parish Development provides an organized way of engaging in this kind of listening.

These reasons lay behind my proposal to introduce Parish Development, *working with the wisdom of the congregation*, as a new pattern of training for local churches.

Most of my colleagues accepted that this sounded like a good idea, but equally claimed, not unreasonably, that they had no time to spare for anything extra. The OLM scheme grew very rapidly but the budget could not

be unfrozen so I had to cut back on CME to pay for it, and was duly criticized for that. We devoted a great deal of time and energy to getting our courses accredited just in time for the government to withdraw the financial incentive completely. If we had stayed with accreditation in those circumstances we would have vastly increased our own bureaucratic burden for little or no educational gain. I reorganized the accounting system (fruit of an Open University course) so that we could all know at the end of every week how much money was available. (The diocesan accountant subsequently adopted my pattern for all diocesan accounts.) A few years on I was able to save £25,000 for the diocese only to find that amount was immediately cut from the following years budget without any consultation or reference to the budget submission I had actually made.

I am quite sure that many people in many situations have to cope with similar sets of frustrations, but two things in particular stand out in my memory:

1. Most people in the training team and in the diocesan office felt that they were overloaded and under resourced. This meant that few people were interested in anything new because it also meant something extra, which seemed foolish if not suicidal.
2. I was presented with several important changes to my staff and budget without any serious consultation. In a hierarchy you have to accept that Bishops are entitled to make such decisions, but if they do so without some kind of conversation with those affected, loyalty and commitment is sorely tested.

It is from within this context of busyness and frustration (as well as moments of delight and real achievement) that I devised Parish Development as a pattern of training for congregations.

Parish Development: the 'toolkit'

I have been able to publish two books which explain what Parish Development involves. The first is *A Workbook for developing the local church* produced in collaboration with Maggie and Michael Kindred (the

Kindreds brought their artistic, presentational and publishing skills; I produced the text.) It is in two parts: first the basic course, followed by a number of suggestions about how a parish might develop building on what the basic course has revealed. It is designed as a resource for training with permission given to copy relevant pages for use within the delivery of the course. (Impey 2009).

The second is *How to Develop your Local Church, Working with the wisdom of the congregation* published by SPCK. This is a fuller and more discursive attempt to cover the same ground as the *Workbook* with less emphasis on how to do it, more on the origins and implications of the questions at the heart of the process (Impey 2010).

How Parish Development happens

I only conduct Parish Development courses for parishes who invite me. It has never been imposed on a parish as some kind of requirement. I do so on only two conditions:

Everyone should be invited (no one should be excluded.)

No one should brief me beforehand (I do not come with any hidden agenda.)

The course is typically delivered in four evening sessions of two hours each, or on one or two Saturdays. I am careful to explain that I cannot predict exactly how long the course will take because we do not know in advance what will be discovered: some discoveries need a longer treatment than others. We will get as far as we can in the time, at the end of which the participants are free to decide whether they would like more.

I persuade congregations to reflect on six sets of questions addressed directly to all members of the congregation together:

1. What is your story? What has happened and how have people reacted?
2. What numerical size are you? How many people are involved in what you do? Are you changing size?
3. What are the purposes of your church?
4. What is your dominant outlook on life?

5. At what stage do you see yourself (as a congregation) on a life cycle?
6. What attracted you to this church - or keeps you coming?

This process is a form of Action Research resulting in an account about *us*, *the congregation*, which is co-created by me and the congregation working together in a planned dialogue. It is a subjective account in as much as the congregation produce it, it is about them, they own it, and to a certain extent they are free to adapt or change it. At the same time it is an objective account in the sense that it is generated in response to questions which relate to facts (opinions are facts of a kind) and it can be shared with people who are not members of the congregation as an up to date account of important aspects of who they are, and what they value.

Question 1 enquires into the Parish Story

This is the story of the parish as it lives in the memories of those who are taking part. It includes a time line of the participant's arrivals, i.e. when they joined the congregation. There are some long time lines (people who joined before the second World War) and shorter ones (no one whose memory of the congregation goes back past the mid 1980's.) Sometimes these time lines reveal large gaps or large clusters which usually have some relevant explanation like new housing or an unpopular vicar. Some have had only two or three vicars in living memory; others have had twelve or more. Some groups date everything by the vicar at the time, others construct the story around significant events; these can range from large diocesan rallies at a racecourse to admitting women and girls into the choir. There can be significant omissions, at least from an outsiders viewpoint, like no mention of the Miners Strike in the 1980's despite having a pit in the parish, or no mention of serious conflict or misdemeanor. ('Leaving under a cloud' is the most specific description so far.)

When encouraged to draw the shape of their story in terms of a simple graph of morale against time, many people draw a complex line of ups and downs which is nearly always rising - morale rising - as we arrive at the present. A few graphs have revealed a 'golden age' in the past, or some trauma which has severely dented morale and from which they are slowly recovering.

Such stories are usually of considerable interest to those who take part in producing them. They learn things they never knew; they discover that others see some things in a different way to themselves. They sense things about themselves e.g. we are generally cautious, or generally adventurous. Other things they make specific - we are good at welcoming people, we are good at fundraising, and so on.

Reflection on the parish story can point up some illogical (possibly unwise) connections like the PCC who would not agree to the vicar having a secretary because his immediate predecessor had had an affair with his secretary; or the parish which chose to prefer a 'person it knew it could trust' to look after its money rather than insist on clear guidelines (e.g. always have two people to count the money etc.) following serious problems with a former treasurer.

Question 2 asks about the size of the congregation

Attempting to produce a precise number to describe the size of a local Church of England church is unrealistic, but a range which covers Usual Sunday Attendance (a figure that is reported annually) and allows for lows and highs is possible. This range is then placed on this scale illustrated in **Table 2.1** and the following suggestions are made:

If your size is wholly or mostly within one of the named columns the way you organize yourselves is probably not a problem.

If your size is wholly or mostly within one of the gaps between named sizes it is likely that you are experiencing stress. This will be aggravated if growing or shrinking in size moves you from a named column into a gap.

| small | | medium | | large | extra large |
|--------------|--|---------------|--|--------------|--------------------|
| under 30 | | 50-120 | | 180+ | 500+ |

Table 2.1 showing the scale used in Parish Development to predict the likely organizational implications for a congregation

The first question is Do these suggestions resonate with you? If so, we can proceed with a possible explanation. If they do not, the feedback may mean I adapt my scale or I accept that there are always exceptions.

The explanation I offer is that each named size can be supported by a stable pattern of organization, but the gaps, 'size transitions,' are places of stress because the smaller pattern of organization cannot easily support the larger numbers, while the larger pattern of organization cannot function without a larger number of people to support it.

Rather than simply tell the congregation this I usually try to draw the insights from them by inviting them to complete the kind of table illustrated in Table 2.2

| | small | medium | large |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| characteristics | like a family | small enough to know people, large enough to do things | the buzz of large gatherings, successful |
| involved members | know everyone, do their bit | take turns in office | take responsibility for areas of church life |
| typical role of vicar | welcome visitor | hands on | manager, supporting team |
| leadership focus | local key person, (more important than office holders) | vicar | team |
| communications | face to face, phone | phone, email, meetings | email, web site |
| organizational style | informal | semi professional | professional |
| tasks | allocated when needed | tend to go with office holders | allocated to different teams |

Table 2.2 Illustrating the contrasts implicit in different size congregations

Different congregations will fill the table with observations which reveal their different perceptions, but the contrast between the sizes is usually well established. As an additional exercise I invite everyone taking part to draw their 'size experience' of churches by locating the size of the church in which they had their formative experience of church, and then linking it with an arrow to the size of the present congregation. (This is illustrated on pages 16 and 17 of my *Workbook*.) Results vary considerably; some churches have very few members with any experience of another size, others have a good proportion. I invite individuals to reflect on how deep an impression their formative or first experience of church has on them: do they still feel that first experience was 'proper' church and the present different size is not quite what they hope for? (The reflection can be especially relevant for clergy who often have little or no experience of small churches, yet are frequently given small churches as their first responsibility.) A last question concerns whether the parish story reflects anything which can be related to changes in organizational structure, or the capacity of the organization to cope, due to changes in the numerical size of the congregation.

Question 3 asks about the purposes of the congregation

Here I use a typology of my own which I have developed drawing on insights from Penny Edgell Becker and Charles Handy, as explained in my Literature Review and in *How to develop your local church* (Becker 1999, Handy 1988, Impey 2010)

Taking as a starting point Jesus' own summary of the law in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 22.37-39) to the effect that we should love God and love our neighbour, I suggest that we can visualize this in a simple three dimensional way by representing love of God in the vertical dimension, and love of neighbour in the horizontal dimension, with three broad directions for three different groups of neighbour;

- 1 the neighbour we see and know, including in particular members of the congregation,

- 2 the neighbour who lives near us, whose needs we become aware of, and

- 3 the distant neighbour whose needs are known to us largely through news media and the work of charities.

This leads me to propose four basic purposes for the local church, which usually has a mix of all four, but in varying proportions. Worship - love of God, the vertical dimension - is an essential feature of all four. One is worship plus fellowship, the community values of mutual support and encouragement (W+F); another is worship plus an active work of serving (some of) the needs of the local community (W+S); another is worship plus active campaigning on an issue that typically affects the distant neighbour, like famine or disaster relief but occasionally involves a local issue like the siting of a wind farm (W+C). An additional purpose, which does not relate so clearly to the 'neighbour' categories, represents a church which offers worship and not much else, in the sense that many people want to be able to join in worship but do not want to get drawn into any of the three other purposes just listed (Just W).

Everyone present is invited to distribute ten votes between these four purposes, first, to indicate what they see as the balance in the church at the moment, and then, as a second vote, to indicate what they would like the balance to be.

The voting paper looks something like this

| W+F | W+S | W+C | Just W |
|-----|-----|-----|--------|
| | | | |

Distribute ten votes between these four purposes to indicate the balance in the church at the moment.

Figure 2 illustrating the voting slip used to register the balance of purposes

A second voting paper invites participants to indicate the balance they would like to see in the future.

I invariably offer an interpretation of the result *before* the votes are counted and the result shared. The first point is that the difference between the first and second vote will be some indication of any pressure for change.

The second point is that the four main purposes each 'prefer' or demand a different pattern of organization. We then together draw up a table of these

contrasts or differences. Different congregations will offer different words but the general result is very like Table 2.3

| | Worship plus fellowship | Worship plus service | Worship plus campaigning | Worship and not much else |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Expectations of members | belong | be an active helper | support | attend |
| Expectation of leaders | good mixers | good organizers | well informed, seize an opportunity | efficient producers (as in dramatics) |
| Expectations of clergy | friendly, approachable, sympathetic | good connections in the local community | an able advocate, good with media | good preachers, good public persona |
| Forms of pastoral care | mutual and member directed | directed toward the needy non-member | large scale, aimed at structures | from clergy, when needed |
| Primary evidence | good worship and active social life | good worship and active involvement in the community | good worship and good publicity for the issue | good worship |
| Any other contrasts | | | | |

Table 2.3 setting out the contrasting features of the four major purposes (This a copy of Table 3.1 in my *How to develop your local church*, p45)

The construction of such a table of contrasts as a shared task is itself an occasion of organizational learning at an individual as well as at the organizational level. The point is then made that each purpose, good in itself (though occasionally this may need discussing³) can get in the way of, or compete with, the other purposes. This is usually most obvious in the competition for people, and for attention.

³ Such a discussion can be found in *How to develop your local church* p39-41 (Impey 2010)

With this in mind we turn together to the interpretation of the votes cast; I suggest that

- if one purpose has more than 50% of the votes cast, that is clearly the dominant purpose for that particular church, with the other three able to function as minority - not the same as unimportant - concerns (a 50+ church)
- if two purposes receive approximately equal votes then we can expect some friction or tension, if not conflict, between the two purposes vying for dominance (a 40:40 church)
- if three purposes receive approximately equal votes then there may be problems relating to making any serious decisions at all. This is because any suggestion for development is likely to have 30% support and 60% or more indifferent or opposed (a 30:30:30 church.)

It is not that one situation is preferable or better. It is that 40:40 and especially 30:30:30 churches are more difficult to organize; they are easier to organize if as many people as possible know what is happening and recognize that the tensions and conflicts are signs of an organizational challenge rather than signs of failure.

The votes are counted and the position of the congregation discussed. Most 50+ churches are happy with the result; the majority of churches I have worked with are 50+ with worship and fellowship as the major purpose; a few 50+ churches have worship and not much else as their dominant purpose (these include cathedrals and some larger churches.) A fair number of churches are 40:40, almost invariably a balance between fellowship and service. Some are already managing the balance well, but a good proportion recognize this as a challenge. A few have revealed themselves as 30:30:30 and all of these have found this a difficult balance to manage. Recognition by the whole congregation that this is in fact the situation that has to be managed usually makes it easier to do. For example, a social event attended by 30% of the congregation can now be seen as successful where before it might have been regarded as a failure.

The pressure for change is not always strong, but so far (about 60 cases) the pressure has always been away from worship plus fellowship, and worship and not much else, toward worship plus service, and worship and

campaigning. Often this would also imply moving from a 50+ to a 40:40 situation. It is important to note that the *aspiration* is not always or even often matched by the *ability* to make this shift⁴.

Where it has seemed appropriate (usually with 30:30:30 churches) I have added a further exercise asking the congregation to identify the activities they would list under the various categories, recognizing that the same activity might be both a service to the community and an occasion of fellowship at the same time. In order to make this last exercise manageable I have added two more categories; Maintenance (e.g. finance) and Worship related (e.g. music making). I have been prepared to allow Evangelism as a seventh category if the congregation insists - I usually suggest that since evangelism includes an implicit invitation to join the church for one of the four basic purposes already listed, it does not need to be a separate category - but then I am working with their wisdom, not mine.

The main focus here is the organizational level of learning, i.e. addressing the question how do we best organize ourselves to fulfill the various purposes for which we exist? But important too is the individual level of learning i.e. that this is a question which needs addressing; and the interpersonal level which recognizes that someone who is not as committed to one purpose in the way you might be, may nevertheless be making a significant contribution to the life of the congregation as a whole in ways that you do not.

This is an appropriate point at which to mention that my presentations are deliberately 'low-tech' using nothing more complicated than a flip chart. But when writing up this exercise in the published Report I usually add pie charts (which the computer produces) to illustrate the proportion of votes cast for each purpose. This makes the identification of 40:40 and 30:30:30 type balances much easier than the presentation of percentages.

⁴ I have discussed this desire for change with Anna Thompson, a fellow doctoral student who works with the Eden Project. She recognized the widespread aspiration but said she found most people need 'nudging' - her word - before the aspiration becomes a reality. My way of expressing this would be to say that serving and campaigning are much more dependent on competent *organizing* than is fellowship or 'just worship.'

Question 4 enquires into a congregation's outlook on life

This question is presented as a simple exercise taken from James Hopewell, though I have made it simpler - and therefore cruder - than Hopewell.

Hopewell's test is linked in his presentation with Northrop Frye's four basic stories to be found in Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Four outlooks on the world are identified, akin to the four points of the compass. Following my convention North is what Hopewell calls *canonic*, an outlook which values obedience to rules and law, related too to Northrop Frye's *tragic* type of story. East is *charismatic* valuing vision and inspiration, Frye's *romantic*. South is *gnostic* valuing knowledge and understanding; Frye's *comic*. West is *empiric* valuing practicalities, what works; Frye's *ironic* (Hopewell 1987).

When these contrasting outlooks have been explained in a non technical way (I have successfully involved children in this exercise by focussing on what kind of stories they prefer) everyone is invited to draw their preferred outlook as an arrow on a simple diagram representing the four points of the compass. Then all the answers are copied onto the same large diagram. Having done this with about sixty congregations I have never found an equal representation of all the outlooks; much more common is a diagram with the vast majority of arrows all on one side of a line drawn through the middle. The direction of the dominant outlook has varied considerably, but the evidence of a largely shared outlook in each congregation has been overwhelming.

This exercise points up important features of inter personal relationships within a congregation. The suggestion is that anyone whose natural outlook is more or less opposite to the dominant outlook is likely not to feel at home within that particular congregation. (This is a suggestion, not an assertion, leading to a negotiated insight if it is accepted. Rejecting the suggestion is quite acceptable.) This can be a critical factor if the opposite outlook belongs to the vicar. In one parish a vicar whose natural outlook was East, and who therefore wanted to share a vision of where God was leading the church was met with incomprehension by a congregation whose dominant outlook was pragmatically West. This kind of organizational learning has significant implications for making appointments, something I incorporate into one of the

possibilities about matching to be found in my *Workbook* page 72 and 73 (Impey 2009).

Outlook is also an indication of implicit theology, already indicated by the Greek words Hopewell uses to describe the four basic positions. I do not usually pursue this theme, at least at this point, beyond pointing out that no congregation I have yet worked with is likely to be able to cater happily for all four main outlooks at the same time.

Question 5 explores the implications of the stage(s) a congregation understands itself to be on a life cycle

This exercise highlights the kind of interpersonal learning which is appropriate for the healthy development of a congregation. It raises in an indirect way the question of handing on responsibility (and therefore power) from one generation to the next.

Presented with a simple curve - the top half of a circle - representing the life cycle of a congregation (or of almost anything) participants are invited to label the various stages from birth to death. When we have done this everyone is invited to express their own perception of where the congregation is on such a curve by ringing an area and adding the word or words which describe this position. The results are correlated and discussed. Unlike outlooks, there can be a surprisingly wide range of perceptions.

Usually only when these opinions are displayed do I offer a refinement of the initial curve, pointing out that congregations are more like families than individuals, so that as one generation declines another reaches maturity and yet another is born. So life cycle curves for congregations overlap, but not always very neatly. A good number of results reveal two favoured places on the curve - one near the top of the rising curve, representing early adulthood, and the second near the top of the declining curve, representing those who are showing signs of their age. If the two locations are placed together and the curves redrawn a potential 'handover point' is revealed. (This is illustrated on page 84 of *How to develop your local church*, Impey 2010). This can lead to a discussion of the predicament many congregations face with

apparently too few people to take responsibility, or sometimes with people who do not want to relinquish their positions; how the older generation can persuade themselves that the younger generation are not yet ready to take responsibility while the younger generation become impatient with the older folk hanging onto power. We talk about the grace of retirement and the grace of taking responsibility, and so on. (I have already mentioned that one of the conditions I make for working with a congregation is that I should not be briefed beforehand - I can facilitate this kind of discussion because I do not know whether, or who, such caps might fit.)

Question 6 asks each individual about what attracted them to this church - or keeps them coming

This is usually a brief exercise compared with those above. It relates to individual and strategic levels of organizational learning which Hopewell describes as 'Househunting' (Hopewell 1987). Four broad answers are offered to the question What attracted you to this church?

- its convenient location
- its encouraging condition
- its facilities which meet your needs
- its feel, that hard to define sense that this is 'your sort of church'

Sometimes we distribute votes, more often we divide the room into four designated quarters and ask everyone to stand in the quadrant which best reflects their reasons for coming.

The results do vary from congregation to congregation but the overwhelming winner is nearly always 'feel'. For Hopewell this meant the symbolic, that hard to pin down factor which influences the car we drive, the kind of clothes we wear, the sort of things we do and the kind of message that is conveyed about us by belonging to this particular church.

It can prompt reflections on what we care about,⁵ and how for example, we can place mistaken hopes in the difference that putting in a kitchen and toilets can make (improving facilities) when the facilities have never been a high priority for any of us. But by contrast providing a space to meet and talk

⁵ This phrase echoes the title of a collection of Philosophical essays by Harry G Frankfurt (Frankfurt 1988). In the title essay he suggests that philosophers have paid much attention to two themes: what to believe and how to behave, neglecting a third, what to care about.

can be both a facility and a symbol of who we are (a fellowship.) So how will we best attract others? (A strategic level question) Perhaps by recognizing that others are most likely to join for the same kind of reasons we did.

Another aspect of the power of the symbolic enables us to recognize how something that appears relatively straightforward (like replacing worn out hymn books) can become highly charged issues, involving a large amount of emotional energy.

A report summarizes what has been learned

The salient points of all the discussions that take place in small groups and in the plenary sessions are recorded at the time on flip charts, and afterwards copied out and incorporated into a report which is made available to all the members of the congregation. At the end of this chapter I provide a summary of the reports produced for the first three of my case studies. Such reports simply record what we did. I promise participants at the end of our sessions together that the report will not contain any surprises or new factors for those who were present throughout, (apart from the views of other group members on the occasions when several groups worked in parallel.)

These reports are typically between 15 - 20 pages of A4, and contain diagrams and tables as well as plain text. They represent an account of what 'we have learned.' In my summing up as well as in the report I invite congregations to see this account as indicating the nature of their *shared practical wisdom* at this particular moment in time. I suggest that they need some time to digest what they have learned about themselves, and to decide what to do about facing any particular challenges the process may have uncovered. (The two most common challenges are about the organizational implications of a *size transition*, and the balancing of purposes in 40:40 and 30:30:30 congregations.) Or, to see their *wisdom* as a basis for choosing appropriate development (see Impey, 2009b, pp.48-74).

I have used this Parish Development pattern of training with a total of over sixty parishes from Kent, Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, South Yorkshire, Staffordshire and West Yorkshire. The largest number of participants from a

single parish has been about fifty, the smallest number (from a small parish) has been ten; a typical average is between twenty and twenty five.

My own learning as a trainer

All this experience and the accumulated data have contributed considerably to my own learning as a trainer. I find myself drawn to the Socratic metaphor of being a 'midwife' to the learning of others. Over time I have learned to do less 'telling' and more 'asking.' For example, in the early days I would explain to a congregation the differences between small, medium and large congregations, but now I encourage them to work it out for themselves, as indicated in the presentation of Question 2 above. I believe I have developed skills in presenting these questions with interpretations of the answers given, in a way that nearly everyone can grasp. I have also been able to present myself as a sympathetic yet neutral facilitator. I have built up a sense of what is typical or normal within a range of answers, and what is extraordinary or potentially problematic. I believe I have discovered two particular strengths of this approach to the training of a congregation (which always includes the vicar.)

One is that because *the shared wisdom* is revealed and discovered together, the reasons for making any appropriate changes are potentially understood by all the people most affected. Appropriate change does not now come as a surprise, or as something that is believed to be unnecessary ('Change for change sake'.)

The second is that a process of shared, and possibly private, reflection has been given a context and a framework. An individual, for example, may be reconciled to accepting that others are not going to share his enthusiasm for Christian Aid but are happy for him to draw attention to it from time to time (the purpose of Worship plus campaigning as a minority concern). Another may reflect that it is time for her to retire, and a third may be prepared to undergo training as a pastoral worker (reflecting on the importance of handing on responsibility in the Life Cycle exercise). Or, at the organizational level, the congregation, including the vicar, can see that if the vicar hands over responsibility for co-ordinating pastoral care to someone who is a

natural organizer, much more pastoral care might happen (as part of moving from medium size to large.) And so on.

What does Parish Development lead to?

Although the learning enabled by Parish Development has a value in itself because it alters the perception of what is happening, a key question is what happens next? This is the point at which different parishes will go in different directions. For some churches what has been revealed will itself point to matters which need urgent and careful attention. In my *Workbook* I have suggested that these include

- a major trauma in the recent past
- a size transition (especially if burn out is present or suspected)
- three major purposes with equal support (a 30:30:30 church)
- a position far down the life cycle (*Workbook* p51.)

In other churches there may be a particularly pressing issue they need to address, for others something that calls for careful planning. For a few the exercise results in a number of different personal insights leading to a retirement or a volunteering, or other small incremental changes. And in some parishes I suspect that the vicar, or others used to determining what happens, quietly shelves the Report and reverts to a more familiar version of autocracy.

Although somewhat out of strict sequence (because of the references to my published accounts of Parish Development) the account I have provided thus far is a fair description of where my practice as a trainer had reached by the time I joined the doctoral program in 2006. In this chapter I have given an account of the various contexts in which Parish Development became such a significant feature of my professional practice. I have described its basic character and given some indication of the learning outcomes it makes possible.

Summaries in tabular form of three actual reports for the first Parish Development exercise follow. A narrative account of these events is provided at the beginning of chapter five.

| Parish A |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 29 people took part |
| <u>The time line</u> for Parish A is complicated by the fact that two churches within the parish functioned separately until the 1970's. Both churches had participants whose memories go back to the 1930's. There was an even spread along the time line |
| <u>Salient points of the story:</u> Vicar at Church 1, very formal Curate at Church 2 when no more curates one service - combined congregation alternating buildings both churches loved equally new church hall and good Friday mornings there fund raising demoralized community due to economic changes choir and music group new family services good links with schools |
| <u>Considerations of size</u> Between 40 and 65 - still overlapping with size transition feeling overburdened? 9 people's formative experience was in larger churches, 15 in medium - does this hint at disappointment, sense of decline? |
| <u>Our purposes</u> the present balance is 50+ with W+F dominant Where we would like to be is nearer to 40:40 with W+S sharing with W+F |
| We also undertook further exercises exploring which of our present activities belonged under which purpose heading, and what each purpose looked for in the vicar, leadership and membership. These are rather too complex to summarize here |
| <u>Our outlook</u> Several people found this exercise difficult and abstained. The predominant outlook is pragmatic and down to earth with a willingness to learn |
| <u>The Life Cycle</u> Most people felt we were 'just over the hill' Did this reflect our age? Handing on responsibility from one generation to the next was difficult |
| <u>Reasons for choosing this church</u> 1 location; 3 between condition and scope; 2 scope; 7 feel and 9 between feel and location. |

| Parish A |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <u>Concluding discussion</u> We had left out Financial viability Two church buildings which represent our major challenge |

Table 2.4 providing a summary of the Parish Development Report for Parish A

| Parish B |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 33 people took part |
| <u>The time line</u> for Parish B began in 1940. There was an even spread along the time line |
| <u>Salient points of the story:</u> Large Sunday Schools and Uniformed groups in the 40's and 50's. Improvements in church buildings and organ in 60's and 70's. More formal in the past more relaxed and child friendly now. Modern language services. New vicarage. Loss of choir members and traditional hymns social life of church developed coffee after service, Church open involvement in community weddings for divorcees, blessings for gays |
| <u>Considerations of size</u> Between 110 and 150 a size transition situation which suggests an organizational change if growth is to happen 16 people had been in medium size churches all their live; 8 had begun in large and 8 in small. Perhaps you prefer medium size? |
| <u>Our purposes</u> the present balance is 50+ with W+F dominant Where we would like to be is not very different, indicating no real pressure for change. You are a family values congregation, functioning rather like a club, with a strong secondary purpose of serving the needs of the wider community. |
| |
| <u>Our Outlook</u> The predominant outlook is one that values wisdom, understanding and the sense that things are likely to turn out well. |
| Life cycle not included |
| <u>Reasons for choosing this church</u> 3 location; 0 condition; 1 facilities (scope); 29 feel |
| <u>Concluding discussion</u> Size suggests that further reflection on how you organize things would be important for development. With a dominant purpose of mutual support you may find your present size ideal (and not really want to grow.) |

Table 2.5 showing a summary of the Parish Development Report for Parish B

| Parish C |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 17 people took part |
| <u>The time line</u> for Parish C began in 1940 with one representative and then from the early 60's until the present there was a fairly even spread along the time line |
| <u>Salient points of the story</u> setting up the parish centre, connexions with other parishes, parish lunches, good neighbour scheme, social activities, Bible lectures, strong musical tradition, organ refurbished, experiments in groups related to the PCC, financial problems and giving campaign |
| <u>Considerations of size</u> Estimated size 150 implies an 'unstable' position - a different organizational pattern will be needed if you are to grow in numbers (We did not do this exercise) |
| <u>Our purposes</u> the present balance is 30:30:30 (W+F 38%, W+S 27%, Just W 25%) Where we would like to be is nearer to 40:40 (W+F 31%, W+S 39%, Just W 14%) These are difficult balances to manage, and the pressure for change indicates a level of dissatisfaction with the way things are. (This is discussed further below) |
| <u>Life cycle not included</u> |
| <u>Our Outlook</u> The predominant outlook combines a realistic, even pragmatic approach with the values of understanding and knowledge. |
| Not included |
| <u>Reasons for choosing this church</u> 1 Location, 2 facilities, 0 condition, 14 feel. |
| <u>Concluding discussion</u> A review of organizational structures with size and the balance of purposes in mind. The loss of former members - mentioned in discussion - may be due to frustrations over the balance of purposes and the desire to change. Such a review involves looking at your expectations of one another. |

Table 2.6 showing a summary of the Parish Development Report for Parish C

Chapter 3

Theoretical concepts undergirding research into Parish Development

In this chapter the theoretical concepts that play a significant role into researching this method of training are examined and explained. They are treated under the headings of Organizational Learning, Practical Wisdom and Metaphors for Organizations.

Organizational Learning

Nancy Dixon's book *The Organizational Learning Cycle: How we can learn collectively* (Dixon 1994) served as a decisive stimulus to the thinking that I have reported in the first part of Chapter 2. In particular she made the point that in a rapidly changing world there are fewer and fewer experts who can advise on the basis that they have 'been there before.' Members of an organization need to recognize that they themselves are now 'the experts' and know their situation better than anyone from outside. Even more tellingly she observed that organizations, by and large, do not foster the development of their members.

In recent years we have seen large numbers of employees dropping out of organizations because they recognize that their own

development is in jeopardy. This exodus has been particularly true for women, whose sensitivity to development issues may be heightened by their more recent entry into many parts of organizations. But men as well have begun to recognize that they must make developmental choices that, in many cases, remove them from traditional organizations.

We have created organizations that are often detrimental to the human beings that work in them.’ (Dixon 1994 p xvii).

Could these observations be relevant to congregations? Might this be a factor in the decline of church membership? Not only was Nancy Dixon providing some resources for organizational learning, she was suggesting that it might be a vital factor if genuine and thoroughgoing development (*oikodome*) is to take place, not just for the organization but also for the members themselves.

The useful ambiguity of Organizational Learning

The term ‘organizational learning,’ as already mentioned, has a useful ambiguity: on the one hand it can mean the learning that belongs to and happens at the level of the organization, in contrast to the learning of individuals, and on the other, it can mean learning about the way we *organize* what we do: both are important.

Shared learning

The sense of organizational learning as shared learning similarly has several shades of meaning. It can stand for the learning the congregation already possess: this will be embedded in its *praxis*. It can also stand for the learning the congregation acquires, which can involve both the unlearning of bad habits, and the discovery of new and fruitful possibilities. This in turn has two aspects: both *what* the congregation learns (content), and *how* it learns it (learning about the *organization* of learning.) Nancy Dixon suggests that an organizational learning cycle, an adaptation of Kolb’s learning cycle, is a useful way of understanding and enabling the steps involved in this kind of learning. She describes this learning cycle in the imperative mood: act, generate, integrate, interpret, act, generate, and so on, (Dixon 1994).

Such an understanding of the cyclical pattern of organizational learning for congregations is a moderately complex matter which can helpfully be understood as happening simultaneously in a number of different ways. Dixon identifies three types of meaning structures in which learning can take place:

1. Collective Meaning Structures (which are held jointly and include assumptions)
2. Accessible Meaning Structures (which are open for discussion and negotiation)
3. Private Meaning Structures (which members withhold from each other).

These meaning structures exist in different proportions in different kinds of organization: a tradition bound organization is dominated by Collective Meaning Structures, (assumptions and convictions about things that cannot be changed like celibacy or an exclusively male priesthood) while an organization with strong divisional cultures may have a whole number of different Accessible Meaning Structures (each belonging to different congregations) which makes the management of the whole organization much more challenging.

Levels within organizations and appropriate learning

A different distinction between the kinds of learning that are needed within a flourishing organization is proposed by Kessler and Bailey (2007) in terms of four interconnected levels;

1. The personal (the way members see their role in the congregation)
2. The inter-personal (the way members relate to one another)
3. The organizational (the way the congregation organizes itself)
4. The strategic (the way the organization relates to its wider environment).

Each of these levels are ideally in some kind of healthy state; when they are not, a defect in any one of them can threaten the whole. But additionally, they also need to be in a healthy balance, or congruence, with one another.⁶ So

⁶ A simple analogy might be drawn with the size of engine appropriate for different vehicles: attempting to power a bus designed to carry fifty passengers with a lawn mower engine would be an exaggerated example of imbalance. A much more sophisticated discussion of the importance of *congruence* in organizations is to be found in Morgan 2006 p55-57.

organizational learning for congregations has this moderately complex structure which might be described as the learning appropriate to each of the four levels, integrated by a learning which holds them in a healthy balance with one another.

Learning about *organizing*

Organizational learning can also be understood with the emphasis on learning about *how* the things that people do together are organized; that is to say, learning about *organizing*. In Parish Development this emphasis plays a considerable role and has been welcomed (as something that had not been thought much about before), understood, and when appropriate, acted on. How this happens can be illustrated by revisiting the relationship between size, purpose and organization addressed in Parish Development questions 2 and 3 in chapter 2 above. These questions are related to theories of how organizational structures - basically, ways of doing things - are appropriate for particular sizes, and particular purposes, and do not work so well with other sizes or other purposes. The way the learning process is organized means that a diagnostic prediction is offered *before* any ailment is identified. So, for example, if a congregation is discovered trying to hold three different purposes in balance (a 30:30:30 church) the suggestion is made that it is likely to be experiencing frustrations and tensions because most 30:30:30 churches do. The suggestion will be negotiated: if it resonates, it can be followed up, if it is not recognized it can be left on one side. By beginning with a diagnostic prediction an alternative framework for accounting for tensions and problems is placed alongside the account that may already exist (for example, that 'we need decisive leadership,' or, its counterpart, that 'X,Y and Z are very difficult people.')

The general character of the wisdom of a congregation

The word 'wisdom' plays a central role in my training practice. I use it as a convenient shorthand for 'practical wisdom' and the way I use it is related to the Greek concepts of *phronesis* (a word which is used in the New Testament as well as by Aristotle, who undoubtedly gave it its distinctive connotation), and *sophia* (whose meaning in the New Testament is influenced in large part

by the Hebrew scriptures.) But if challenged to 'define' wisdom I decline: 'wisdom' is something that can be recognized but not easily defined with any precision. It is related closely to particular rather than general situations; it will be timely and local, as Toulmin suggested. (Toulmin 1990). It does however have characteristics which distinguish wisdom from convictions or theories. I highlight four in what follows

1. Wisdom has a direction rather than a destination
2. Wisdom involves deliberations about appropriate action
3. Wisdom allows rival narratives to exist alongside one another
4. Wisdom is essentially oral rather than written

Wisdom has a direction rather than a destination

'Direction' means the initial purpose of developing an awareness of the shared wisdom a congregation possesses, whatever it might be, in order to use and develop that wisdom to build up the congregation. By suggesting that a wisdom does not have a destination means that it does not have a predefined content. The kind of predefined content implied on diocesan websites, for example, are 'Go for growth' (Blackburn Diocese); 'Strategy for growth' (Sheffield Diocese); 'We are committed to growth' (Norwich Diocese). The implication in these three examples is that 'growth' is our destination. More open goals are represented by 'we aim to encourage confident Christian communities across our 496 parishes; communities that express joyful hope in the Gospel' (Bath and Wells), and 'Transforming Church' (Birmingham Diocese)⁷. Now I am quite prepared to admit that dioceses with clear strategies for growth may well have a nuanced and subtle understanding of what growth means, and may well argue that it is represents a direction rather than a destination, but I have sensed that an emphasis on 'growth' makes some congregations feel that they have 'failed' in a way that is not supportive.

These reflections are supported by Robert Chia and Robin Holt who argue that wisdom can profitably be seen as 'learned ignorance' defined as 'a cultivated humility, meekness of demeanor, and openness of mind that is

⁷ These diocesan websites were all consulted on 17th August 2012. They are the five dioceses in which I have worked.

distinct from the aggressive and relentless pursuit, acquisition, and exploitation of knowledge' (Chia & Holt, 2007 p505). Part of their argument concerns the importance for wisdom of the place of *not knowing*. One obvious barrier to learning is the assumption that we already know all that is needed. Another barrier is the assumption that *someone* (an expert or someone further up the hierarchy, for example) will know what is needed. Wisdom is not a dogmatic assertion that these possibilities are never true, but a readiness to meet each new challenge with an open mind and with a strong sense that it is quite possible that we do not yet know all we need to know in order to make wise decisions.⁸

Another part of what Chia and Holt argue for concerns participation. Humility and openness of mind enable people to join in a conversation about the development of a congregation, including people who are not used to being invited to share their own views.⁹ Many clergy and lay church leaders seem obliged to appear confident, and to have a ready supply of encouraging answers; otherwise they are failing the people who depend on them. When a serious problem arises a clear response should not be far behind. Or, the problem and a proposed solution should be presented together: this is what is meant by destination. It reflects a leader-led model of congregations which locates initiative almost exclusively with the leadership, and keeps the led in an unhealthy dependency.

By contrast the model of a local church as a community of Christians led by the spirit of God, *koinonia*, bound together by involvement and participation in the Body of Christ, each with a different part to play, will locate the initiative for development *with their shared wisdom* which often begins from *not knowing what to do*. Such a starting point can have many potential virtues:

- it has an honesty
- it welcomes the active participation of everyone in finding the way forward

⁸ Compare Gregory Bateson: "First there is humility... not as a moral principle... but simply as an item of a scientific philosophy. In the period of the Industrial Revolution, perhaps the most important disaster was the enormous increase of scientific arrogance." (Bateson 1973, p413)

⁹ Recently at one of my Parish Development consultations someone who is a school teacher and church organist declared that this was the first occasion in her professional and church life that anyone has suggested that her views would be valued.

- it takes every member seriously and values their contribution
- whatever happens as a result will potentially enjoy a shared sense of responsibility and ownership
- the process of deciding, begun from such a starting point, is more likely to build up a sense of community and shared destiny.

Wisdom involves *deliberating* about appropriate action

The values wisdom seeks to embrace are multiple. Wisdom involves an attempt to hold in a fruitful tension the values of logical argument, considerations of right and wrong, a sense of what is beautiful and fitting, a recognition of what it is important to care about, congruity with current knowledge, and the application of a sense of meaning to what has happened, or to what is proposed.¹⁰

This characteristic of wisdom is linked with the attempt to see things whole in contrast, for example, to scientific reductionism which understands physical, chemical and biological phenomena largely by breaking them down into component parts and basic forces. Such reductionism may be appropriate for the material sciences, but the world of human affairs cannot be so treated without serious distortion. Wisdom, in contrast to science, attempts to understand human beings in the complexity of their relationships with one another and with God. Wisdom is therefore a part of the striving for unity which is involved in any attempt to see things whole, which in turn involves a negotiation between ideas and values at the same time as being a negotiation between people, and between people and God, all of which leads to action, in the sense that it affects practice and not merely what people think.

At the level of action, wisdom recognizes that it is often impossible to uphold every value at the same time; emerging from a muddle or a serious mistake may involve a whole number of steps, each of which only satisfies one of the major values. In the kind of church situations being studied here the moving on of a vicar may be the wisest move even when the vicar cannot be held

¹⁰ This sentence is my construction of the five major philosophical themes - logic, ethics, aesthetics, epistemology and metaphysics - which Kessler and Bailey (2007) use to give shape to *Handbook of Organizational and Managerial Wisdom*.

responsible for the problem their moving on eases. This is naturally a complex and controversial theme which cannot be argued for in general terms, but which has its strength in particular situations. Wisdom does not follow universal principles which are valid at all times and in all circumstances; rather it deliberates about the appropriate and timely step to take.¹¹

Aristotle, in his exposition of *phronesis* in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, links *phronesis* to the ability to deliberate well as a characteristic of prudent people, which is a process which ‘arrives at something good.’ In *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI. ix. 3-7. he stresses the important part that deliberation (*boules*) plays in the development of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Negotiation might be an alternative translation of *boules* but whatever opinion might be held about the interpretation of Aristotle’s Greek, negotiation and deliberation are important features of practical wisdom in communities.

Gareth Morgan makes a parallel point when he writes of the management of paradox as part of the dialectics of change in organizations. The paradoxes he identifies include balancing ‘Think long term’ with ‘Deliver results now,’ and ‘Decentralize’ with ‘Retain control.’

‘The first step ... rests in *recognizing that both dimensions of the contradictions that accompany change usually have merit.* ... the management task is to find ways of integrating the competing elements. Paradox cannot be successfully resolved by eliminating one side’ (Morgan 2006, p283).

Wisdom allows rival narratives to exist alongside one another

Morgan recognizes that competing elements can be embedded in the different stories a congregation tells about itself. Levitt and March observe that

¹¹ In *Team of Rivals* Doris Kearns Goodwin presents the political genius of Abraham Lincoln holding together the value of emancipating slaves with that of maintaining the Union, against those who were happy to do one at the expense of the other.

‘Experiential knowledge, whether in tacit form or informal rules, is recorded in an organizational memory. That memory is orderly, but it exhibits inconsistencies and ambiguities’ (as cited by Sims, 1999).

James Hopewell (1987) places considerable emphasis on the importance of stories for understanding congregations. He sought to find a parallel story, usually drawn from mythology, to express a congregation’s position. In one example he suggests that a particular congregation reflects the story of Briar Rose (better known in Britain as Sleeping Beauty) waiting asleep until her prince would come and kiss her back to life. This can be a good way to reveal the unconscious expectations of a congregation, but I have not chosen to follow this path, partly because I am not familiar with the range of mythology anyone following Hopewell would need to draw on, but mainly because one dominant story of this kind could obscure some of the lesser, but still important stories which need to be respected. I think that within Hopewell’s assumptions there lurks the belief that there is ‘one thing needful,’ an assumption that the wisdom tradition does not share.

David Sims offers a way of understanding how an organization can be said to learn by exploring the changing status of different stories within an organization. In *Organizational Learning as the Development of Stories: Canons, Apocrypha and Pious Myths* Sims suggests that organizational learning is connected with the organization’s *memory* (rather than simply its behaviour) and that this memory ‘is best understood by examining the stories and myths of which it consists and by which it is created, developed and sustained.’ (Sims1999, p44)

These stories have a status, just as different scriptures have in religious traditions: the canonical are ‘official’, the apocryphal stories are valued, especially by some subgroups, and on the fringe are pious myths which are held by yet smaller subgroups. Since different people remember things differently within a congregation it is important for the well being of the whole congregation that these different stories which ‘exhibit the inconsistencies and ambiguities’ Levitt and March have referred to, are not quickly divided into ‘true or false’ but are allowed, even encouraged, to stand alongside each other as alternative accounts which taken together reveal the richness and

complexity of a congregation. The shared wisdom of the congregation will deliberate about which of these accounts are to be given priority.

Wisdom is expressed and developed through oral exchanges, rather than through written texts

The background for this observation is to be found in Stephen Toulmin's *Cosmopolis* (1992), already referred to. The advantage of 'oral over written' is the greater freedom for negotiation and mediation which oral conversations allow.

'Oral' enables flexibility in response to the spirit of the conversation. The articulation of a shared wisdom is a result of deliberation, a process in which people must be free to explore possibilities which they can then choose to accept or reject. The oral - not because of the words, but because of the face to face presence of the participants - can enable the communication of emotions, commitments and the symbolic significance of what is being discussed which are all important factors in the make up of a congregation. Deliberation needs time, time for people to digest the significance of what has been discussed, and time for minds to change.

The oral nature of wisdom presents particular challenges for research because it is all but impossible to capture: no sooner are things written down than they change. In that respect they are like

'the wind (*pneuma*) [which] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (*Pneumatos*.)' John 3.8. NRSV.

Metaphors which shape the perception of organizations

Because I use Morgan's ideas as a major tool for understanding my research findings, this account of his *Images of Organizations* is extended. Morgan believes that different metaphors determine, or at least profoundly

influence, the different ways in which organizations are understood. A metaphor provides 'a way of seeing,' but importantly, 'a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing.'

Morgan presents eight significant metaphors which are applied to organizations. His book, he says, is about the art of reading and understanding organizational life. The art of reading situations is a mixture of intuition, the suspension of immediate judgment and the employment of several angles or perspectives on any situation. Poor, or less successful readings of situations are made from a fixed standpoint, leading often to a rigid and inflexible response.

Metaphors are equivalent to *a way of thinking* and *a way of seeing*. Metaphors always create distortion and are inherently paradoxical. As a result no single theory will ever provide an all purpose point of view. But 'Effective readings are *generative*. They produce insights and actions that were not there before. They open new action opportunities. They make a difference.' (Morgan 2006, p361)

What follows in this section is a presentation of the salient features of each metaphor, which necessarily omits much of the detail and subtlety of Morgan's own presentation. I follow Morgan's order, apart for the metaphors of Flux and Transition, and of the Brain, which I place last because they have major and rather different implications for understanding the wholesome development of congregations.

Organization as Machine

Few people would naturally think of applying the metaphor of a machine to a congregation, but the habit of *organizing* in mechanical ways has been so successful and widespread ¹² that it leads to a mechanical pattern of thinking and working which can be very difficult to avoid. A bureaucratic and hierarchical organization frequently exhibits the character of a machine, not only in the efficiency with which it tries to do things, but also in the way it

¹² Morgan points to mass production factories, offices processing insurance claims or tax returns, fast-food restaurants and many service organizations.

treats most of the people who work in it. An emphasis on following agreed procedures can sap initiative and individual responsibility; people are required to fit the organization so that it may thrive, rather than the organization being built on the strengths and potentials of people, enabling them to thrive within a thriving organization.

Aspects of the mechanical metaphor in church life are connected with a bureaucracy which includes the management of finances, including payment of quota¹³, faculty jurisdiction¹⁴, and perhaps some of the pressures parishes feel the diocese puts on them.¹⁵ The hierarchical structure of the clergy is not, I sense, such a clear example of mechanical control as it might be in a factory producing cars, or in a fast-food outlet.

Organization as an organism

The notion of a congregation as a living entity is, at first sight at least, much more appropriate than being likened to a machine. This metaphor focusses attention on the relationship with the wider environment and how that relationship enables (or diminishes) the chances of survival as the different needs of the organism are met. The biological metaphor also suggests seeing the organism as a system, made up of a set of subsystems.

The application of this metaphor to churches will point up the way that survival is a significant factor, even when it stays - or is kept - in the background; the relationship with the wider environment is brought into

¹³ The quota is an annual payment parishes make to the diocese for central services; in some dioceses this is called 'Parish Share.' It is calculated using a complex formula which is intended to deliver 'fairness.' The parish in return has its clergy paid and housed from central funds, and receives support from the diocese. In this way 'richer' parishes - and other central funds - subsidize 'poorer' parishes: a parish therefore does not have to be self financing. It is one of the weaknesses of this system, in my opinion, that most parishes are relatively unaware of the subsidies they receive and only notice the quota they have to pay.

¹⁴ Faculty Jurisdiction is a planning permission facility within Canon Law which requires parishes to obtain legal permission before making many alterations and repairs to ecclesiastical property. Dioceses see this as an important process which keeps churches free from the intrusion of secular planning authorities. Parishes often see it simply as a burdensome restriction.

¹⁵ Dioceses, and diocesan Bishops, frequently urge all parishes to do the same sort of thing, like Produce a Parish Audit, undertake Mission Action Planning, Develop Collaborative Ministry or Go for Growth.

focus, as is the recognition that subsystems (like choirs, or Mothers Unions) with distinct needs will relate in different ways to the system as a whole.

Organization as a Culture

A focus on culture, according to Morgan, enables us to appreciate how an organization creates a social reality. A culture is not something that can be easily defined. Nor can it be changed as if it were one coat among several people might choose to wear. It is an all pervasive thing, symbolized in every aspect of an organization, especially in those things people take for granted. It is often only noticed when the organization feels threatened. Cultures can be distinguished from one another in many ways: by occupation, by nationality, by class, by language, by musical preference, and so on. Each culture tends to see itself as normal, and other patterns of behaviour as 'not what we do'. Some organizational cultures are shaped by their founders, others may exhibit a gender bias or be dominated by a powerful personality, and so on. A culture is a way of life, a 'living phenomenon through which people jointly create and re-create the worlds in which they live.' (137)

Morgan describes culture by employing a cascade of characteristics - 'mind-sets, visions, paradigms, images, metaphors, beliefs and shared meanings... [which lead to] detailed language, a code of behaviour...a reality that can be lived on a daily basis.' (138)

He identifies four strengths of this metaphor

- 1 It draws attention to the importance of the symbolic
 - 2 It rests in shared systems of meaning
 - 3 It reveals how the organization's relationship with the wider environment is also socially constructed - indeed the environment is often best understood as an extension of the organization. (This insight occurs again in the discussion of *autopoiesis*.)
 - 4 It shows how organizational change is bound up with cultural change.
- Its weakness lies in the mistaken impression many managers seem to have that cultures can be manipulated or easily changed.

Morgan's description of culture is closely related to my own use of shared wisdom except that Morgan is writing with the *managers* of organizations in

mind, while my approach is to address *all the members* of a congregation since they share responsibility for their culture (and their shared wisdom.)

The application of this metaphor to churches promises to highlight the importance of the symbolic, help identify shared systems of meaning, perhaps reveal how an understanding of the environment might be largely their own social construct, and point to cultural clashes between subgroups (for example, clashes between traditional choirs and modern music groups.)

Organization as a Political System

Seeing an organization as a political system draws attention to the themes of interests, conflict and power. Morgan arranges his discussion of these topics under the headings of *Systems of Government*, *Systems of Political Activity*, *Managing Pluralist Organizations* and concludes with observations about the strengths and limitations of the metaphor. A full dialogue with this metaphor would be more than enough for another research topic, but in brief I would relate the major points of what he has to say to the organizational features of a congregation as follows:

The system of governance of a congregation (the Parochial Church Council) may not now be the best system for enabling a congregation to develop and flourish because it can be dominated by the articulate, or by long standing members exerting power in a less than democratic way (for example, by intimidation.)

The legitimate interests of different groupings (representing different purposes) is a difficult matter to balance (*managing pluralism*) which is best achieved in a congregation (a voluntary organization) when it is seen as a *shared responsibility*, which is not to deny that clergy and other leaders also need training in how to oversee such balances, (the proactive side of conflict management). In other words, tensions and conflicts of interest are to be expected, and need to be balanced whenever possible. (Compare the discussion of Parish Development Question 3 above).

A strength of this metaphor is the recognition that political activity is always an important feature of congregational life; if this can be acknowledged and allowed for in as open and transparent a way as possible, this strengthens a

congregation. A weakness of the metaphor can almost amount to a neurotic obsession that sees everything that happens as part of a sinister struggle for power and domination (the sort of mentality that thrives when normal open relationships have broken down.)

Organization as a Psychic Prison

Morgan entitles this chapter 'Exploring Plato's Cave' and begins with a discussion of Socrates' allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*, pointing to the way members of an organization can become 'trapped by constructions of reality that at best give an imperfect grasp on the world' (p208). Examples include the unthinkableness for earlier industrialists of 'just-in-time' manufacturing systems, and the *groupthink* which made the Bay of Pigs fiasco possible. The discussion then moves into an exploration of the importance of the unconscious including repressed sexuality, the patriarchal family, death and immortality, anxiety, dolls and teddy bears (the role of transitional objects in identities), shadow and archetype, and concludes with a discussion of the creative and destructive forces at play in the unconscious. At one level a direct correlation of what might be happening within a congregation with some of these themes would be pastorally and politically inept. But it provides an important reminder that humans are not simply rational beings who are content to have their lives controlled by logic alone. The place that wisdom allows for mystery and ignorance (the unknown) is relevant to this aspect of organizational life.

Organization as an instrument of Domination

More readily understood, but possibly no easier to address, is the metaphor of the organization as an instrument of domination. One aspect of domination that can readily be acknowledged however is the way congregations can overload members - not just clergy - leading to burn out. The management of workloads in a voluntary organization is an important but difficult thing to manage.

More generally churches find it difficult to recognize that an organization that believes itself to be well meaning in all it does can nevertheless be harmful

for some of its members.¹⁶ This harm can range from notorious cases of abuse to more subtle patterns of exclusion and deliberate marginalization. Awareness of this aspect of organizational life can lead to the adoption of protective policies for children and vulnerable adults for example, but drawing attention to more subtle forms, like colonialism, patriarchy, racism, gender bias and the like, is a much more challenging task.

Flux and Transformation as a way of understanding change in organizations

Under this heading Morgan discusses a number of insights into how change and transformation function as constant features of the world in which we live, and which are therefore useful metaphors for understanding how organizations change. The major themes include the notion of *autopoiesis*; a discussion of *chaos theory*; the idea of shifting attractors; the value of thinking with loops not lines; and an understanding of the dialectics of change which in turn suggests the need to manage paradox.

The idea of *autopoiesis*, developed by two Chilean scientists as a theory of living systems from the viewpoint of the system itself, rather than that of an external observer, resonates with my notion of the *wisdom of the congregation*, (in contrast to the wisdom of an observer.) They suggest that living systems are characterized by autonomy, circularity and self-reference. The 'aim of such systems is ultimately to produce themselves: their own organization and identity is their most important product'. (Morgan 2004 p 243).

This resonates with the sense that for many local churches their continuing existence is the most important thing about them (rather than what they do in an active sense, if such a distinction can be maintained.) The notion of simply being there as a witness, keeping the rumour of God alive, is important for many churches. The change of perspective suggested by *autopoiesis* involves the abolition of the distinction between an organization and its

¹⁶ In a different way Jerry Harvey addresses this in his essay "Organizations as Phrog Farms." The fairy story is reversed: organizations frequently take princes and princesses and turn them into phrogs. (Harvey, 1988).

environment; what an organization thinks of as its environment is essentially *part of itself*.

Chaos theory offers rather different insights. One is that some kind of order *always* emerges from chaos, so the lesson seems to be that we need not be too alarmed when things threaten to get out of hand. (This maybe all well and good if we consider mathematical models of chaos, but political and national models suggest that passing through chaos is a very painful and costly business.) Another is that small changes can lead to significant transformations. Shifting attractors can 'flip' a system from one state to another. (The drawback of this insight is that, like so many things, it may only be clear in hindsight.)

The notion of mutual causality is expressed in the phrase 'loops not lines,' and represented in diagrams which display the complex inter-relatedness of many things. Mutual causality provides a useful way of understanding the dynamics of change in systems and organizations. The 'loops' represent the two way interaction of communication between elements, including what is often called 'feedback'. It is a valuable correction of the simple but frequently dominant notion that 'A causes B' (lines, forgetting loops) which over simplifies any account of what is happening.

In the dialectics of change Morgan includes a discussion of Chinese philosophy and Marxist analysis which suggests that change in human affairs involves a discernible pattern. This pattern involves a dialectic, or constant struggle between opposing forces, *both of which have an important value, or are in some significant way inseparable*. So, for Morgan, the management of change involves the management of paradox.

The idea of the organization as a Brain

The notion of an organization functioning like a brain would seem ideally suited to a research question about how congregations learn, but the highly complex nature of the brain implies that an answer based on this metaphor might be highly complex too. What is more, Morgan seems to adopt more of a future orientation in his presentation of this metaphor than he does with the

other seven. The potential, rather than the present reality, offered by this way of seeing an organization comes to the fore. His presentation is in two main sections: Creating Learning Organizations, and Organizations as Holographic Brains.

Creating Learning Organizations

Morgan relates what he has to say about creating learning organizations to the relatively new discipline of cybernetics, and the development of sophisticated feedback mechanisms of the kind which guide guided missiles, and enable thermostats to maintain steady temperatures. These are processes of essentially negative feedback which reflect one of the ways our brains work, for example, when we pick up a pencil 'by avoiding not picking it up.' (82 and 83.) This process is skilled at eliminating error, but can also lead to the maintenance of an inappropriate pattern of behaviour because of an unjustified assumption that the operating norms are sound. But human brains are also able to detect and correct errors in operating norms and make necessary corrections, but this kind of learning involves what many have come to call 'learning to learn.' In developing this concept Morgan refers to the distinction between single loop and double loop learning associated with Argyris and Schon, (something discussed in my Literature Review, and already mentioned). Double loop learning involves changing assumptions and their associated patterns of behaviour. Morgan sets out four guidelines for 'Learning Organizations.'

1 Scanning and anticipating environmental change: this means accepting change as normal, embracing potential futures and using uncertainty as a resource for new patterns of development.

2 Challenging operating norms and assumptions: this involves questioning what we take for granted (something Schon calls 'framing and reframing'), which in turn implies a policy of openness and risk taking. This sort of policy raises an anxiety which can stifle the very policy itself unless it is realized that the new patterns of organization emerge from the apparent (or all too real) chaos this policy can involve.

3 Encourage 'emergent' organization: intelligence evolves in the brain - it is not a centrally controlled organ but rather 'a decentralized *emergent* phenomenon.' (92). Reference points need to be determined which define a

space in which possible actions and behaviours can emerge. One way of doing this is to define what you do *not* want to happen - 'the avoidance of noxiants'.¹⁷ By setting limits a space is made into which new patterns emerge.

4 Look for designs that facilitate learning: adopt a philosophy that views and encourages the capacity of learning to learn as a key priority.

Organizations as Holographic Brains

The holographic principle enfolds the whole into all the parts, so that the whole can be reconstructed from any of the broken parts of a hologram. In a similar way, the different parts of the brain contain all that is necessary to restore the functions of the whole if part is destroyed.¹⁸ In this way the brain is capable of regenerating and organizing itself. If organizations were able to regenerate and self organize in a similar way, they would enjoy many advantages.

Morgan identifies five important principles which make this kind of holographic organization possible. They are

- 1 Build the whole into the parts
- 2 The importance of redundancy
- 3 Requisite variety
- 4 Minimum specs
- 5 Learning to learn

Building the whole into the parts is the first and key principle. It involves ensuring that the visions, values and culture of the organization permeate every part, as if they were a corporate DNA; establishing a networked intelligence available to all rather than confined to certain parts only; setting up structures that reproduce themselves, and holistic teams, which means

¹⁷ The word 'noxiant' is not to be found in English Dictionaries, though it is clearly related to noxious. Morgan puts 'the avoidance of noxiants' in quotation marks, as I have done, but gives no reference. George Lovell uses the term in his *Analysis and Design* and says in a footnote that he owes the term to Gareth Morgan. (Lovell 1994 p122ff).

¹⁸ The metaphor seems to be based on the 'potential' for this to happen, not on the evidence for it actually happening in all or most cases of brain injury.

that members are able to stand in for each other, even though they may have diverse roles.

The importance of redundancy, broadly means more resources than are strictly necessary in information processing capacity, and in skills. This is essential if space is to be created for experiment and innovation. One example is parallel processing where more than one team address the same problem, and subsequently come together to compare results.

The third principle Morgan calls Requisite Variety which means a proactive embracing of the environment in all its diversity (rather than a team of the likeminded trying to cope with 'everything' which is a severe form of self limitation.) Diverse stakeholders who represent the complexity of the situations and challenges being faced are deliberately brought together in order to work out an appropriate response.

Minimum specs is a principle designed to give everyone involved the maximum space and freedom to develop innovative and productive ideas. The natural instincts of management frequently limit such space by prescribing too closely what is desired.

The principle of learning to learn has already been discussed under the heading Creating Learning Organizations above.

These three interrelated concepts: Organizational Learning, Practical Wisdom and metaphors for understanding organizations play a central role in assessing the value of Parish Development.

Chapter 4

Researching the development of the wisdom of a congregation

Research into the effectiveness or otherwise of a new pattern of training is faced with several challenges. One is Who will be the best judge? If a pattern of training aims to develop the congregation's awareness of its own shared wisdom, then the congregation's judgment of what happened must carry some weight. On the other hand people, including people in congregations, are able to deceive themselves, so a more objective judgment would also be valued.

Another concerns quite what is being judged. A training program is a complex thing in itself and may have strong and weak aspects within it. Apart from the concepts described in the last chapter which have played an important part in the design of the training and the research, there are significant values and purposes implicit within Parish Development which are also being tested.

In this chapter I describe the implicit theology, pedagogy and ethics which are implicit in *working with the wisdom of the congregation* before explaining the steps taken to test whether there was enough quality evidence to substantiate the thesis.

Theology implicit in Action Research

I divide this account of my engagement with theology into two parts: the theological purposes behind Parish Development, and the theological values and perceptions which are implicit within this approach to training.

The theological purpose of Parish Development

Theologically the purpose of Parish Development training is fundamentally about supporting parishes in ways appropriate to their needs and their context. Christian Mueller in his two volume work *Lehre vom Gemeindeaufbau* (Moeller 1991, 1990) relates the concept of Gemeindeaufbau (parish development) to the New Testament word *oikodome* which is usually translated as 'build up' as in I Corinthians 8.1b 'knowledge puffs up but love builds up' (NRSV). Moeller sees so much richness and subtlety in the word *oikodome* that he declares it virtually untranslatable (Vol 1 p5). For him it is the key concept for understanding parish development (Mueller 1990 p145).

Weder Erbauung noch Aufbau noch Auferbauung geben genau das wieder was das Neue Testament mit *oikodome* sagen will, obwohl eine Lehre vom Gemeindeaufbau der Sache nach genau das in die Wirklichkeit von Gemeinde zu uebersetzen hat, was *oikodome* in der Bibel meint.¹⁹ (Moeller 1991, 24)

I would like to believe that a similar theological weight could be carried by the English word 'development,' though I fear it is sounds too prosaic to function as an adequate translation of *oikodome*. My strategy is to come to a similar perception of the rich meaning of *oikodome* by an alternative route; by speaking of the development of *wisdom*, as a way of understanding how the Holy Spirit is at work in developing or building up the church and the world.

¹⁹ By a nice irony, at least the beginning of this passage is virtually untranslatable! The word 'Auferbauung' does not appear in The Oxford-Duden German Dictionary but has been constructed by Moeller to emphasize the difficulty which the crescendo of words at the beginning of the sentence is designed to convey. My attempt to put this into English fails to capture this crescendo.' Neither edification nor development nor building up captures quite what the New Testament conveys with the word *oikodome* even though the substance of a Doctrine of Parish Development [the title of his book] should mean for parishes just what the word *oikodome* means in the Bible.'

I also believe that the Christian Gospel is communicated ultimately by a community. The clearest expression of this I found in Wilfried Engemann's description of Practical Theology:

Praktische Theologie untersucht, entwirft und vermittelt
Theoriemodelle fuer die Praxis der Gemeinde, durch Personen und
auf der Basis von Zeichen unter den Bedingungen unterschiedlicher
Situationen das Evangelium zu kommunizieren. (Engemann 2001).²⁰

The theological values and perceptions implicit in Parish Development

One thing especially holds these beliefs together: an understanding of the church, the Christian community, as *koinonia* (communion, participation, fellowship, sharing). I have discussed this in my Literature Review, and in my Publishable Article which refers in particular to the Faith and Order Paper 198 entitled *The Nature and Mission of the Church, A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (World Council of Churches 2005). I summarize the strong features of this concept in accordance with my reading of Paper 198:

- *Koinonia* represents a significant understanding of the nature of the church evident already in the New Testament and discernible throughout Christian history
- It points to the embodiment of the Gospel in a living community (undermining any notion that the Gospel is expressed primarily in propositions)
- It points to the shared nature of the Christian life (undermining individualism)
- It therefore suggests the appropriateness of an educational and training policy which *works with the wisdom of the congregation* in attempting to work with *koinonia* as a whole.

Parish Development, as a new pattern of training, accompanies a shift in the way theology and practice are understood. There had been an assumption, certainly in the early years of my ordained life, that the practice of ministry in

²⁰ Practical Theology investigates, designs and negotiates theoretical models for the praxis of a congregation in order to communicate the Gospel through people and on the basis of signs and symbols, in different situations and under different conditions. (My translation) This sentence is the actual thesis for which Engemann argues in the paper cited.

the church was the application of theology, in much the same way as the mathematics that scientists use is *applied* mathematics in contrast to the *pure* mathematics which underlies it, and on which it is apparently dependent. This assumption about a notional *pure* theology being *applied* in the work of ministry is giving way to a much more sophisticated understanding of the complex interaction of theory and practice. In Brownings terms we are dealing with theory laden practice and practice laden theory (Browning 1996). The recognition that practice is an important contributor to theological understanding and not merely a deductive consequence of a supposedly pure theology is accompanied by other significant shifts in the way we understand the complex world in which we find ourselves. The most significant of these shifts, as already mentioned, are those highlighted by Toulmin, namely the movement from the written to the oral, from the universal to the particular, from the general to the local and from the timeless to the timely (Toulmin, 1992). Walter Brueggemann (1993) argues that Biblical texts should be treated as resources which *fund* the transitions Toulmin highlights and not be used, for example, in an attempt to establish any kind of *hegemony* for a supposed Biblical view. By *funding* Brueggemann means in part what I describe as ‘placing alongside’, especially the placing of different, apparently rival stories alongside one another rather than attempting to make one primary and the others dependent (if valid) or discounted (if thought to be invalid.) I argued in my Publishable Article that the purposes revealed by Parish Development Question 3 should be placed alongside statements about the purposes of the church to be found in traditional ecclesiological studies, for each illuminate the other.

Parish Development takes place within congregations where much else is going on at the same time, especially worship, prayer and pastoral care. This is taken for granted, and certainly not taken over. Thus Bible Stories, sermons, personal experiences and testimonies, singing, the celebration of Festivals, the nurture of children, the care of each other, baptisms, weddings and funerals, fund raising, the maintenance of buildings and all the activities of parish life are happening at the same time. These things also are ‘placed

alongside' the stories and insights of Parish Development for the *wisdom of the congregation* to understand and order.

The pedagogical values implicit in Parish Development

My engagement with pedagogical literature and practice leads me to locate Parish Development and *working with the wisdom of the congregation* within four significant and interrelated themes

1. Training and management
2. The involvement of the ignored or overlooked
3. Direct and indirect communication in learning
4. The development of new resources

Training and management

In 1994 Christopher Mabey and Paul Iles wrote

'Responsibility for development has been shifting from tutor and trainer to line manager-as-coach and trainee. The development process has overtaken the training event at an individual, group and organizational level. The focus is now on learning through reframing workplace problems, self-determined development, unfreezing barriers to learning, and understanding what it means to be a learning organization.'

(Mabey and Iles 1994 p1)

If this shift was evident in the wider world almost twenty years ago it was not so in the life of the churches. Training was then, and still is, largely about the preparation of individuals for positions of leadership, including their refreshing or updating from time to time. Management decisions are made by those who have become leaders and who therefore have the authority to manage. Specialist training is given to senior leaders. All this is perhaps inevitable in a hierarchical organization with a long history and a well defined legal framework. My judgment is that this way of doing things by establishing who has legitimate authority to make decisions is being undermined by a recognition that decision making and learning are inextricably bound together. This is especially so when it comes to decisions affecting congregations which are communities of individuals and groups, who come

together on a voluntary basis. The heart of the challenge I am trying to identify here might in the past have been described, following Locke, as the 'consent of the governed.' In small, human size communities this is becoming 'with the cooperation of the membership.' (In industry this would be 'with the cooperation of the workforce.') Genuine attempts have been made by 'leaders' to consult 'members' in order to gain 'consent.' What is needed now, if the trends that Maby and Iles point to continue, is the involvement of the membership on a voluntary basis in 'learning through reframing [workplace] problems, self-determined development, unfreezing barriers to learning, and understanding what it means to be a learning organization.' I believe Parish Development, *working with the wisdom of the congregation*, enables churches to participate in this important cultural shift.

The involvement of the ignored or overlooked

Freire famously wrote about the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire 1972). I am tempted to describe *working with the wisdom of the congregation* as a contribution to the pedagogy of the ignored or overlooked, recognizing that to be ignored is a form of oppression, (though a mild form compared with the oppression that many people suffer in today's world). The churches have long been concerned about the education of lay people, and have made sincere attempts to provide opportunities for the laity to learn more about the faith than is normally possible through Sunday Services. Most of this however has followed the 'banking' theory of education, rather than 'dialogics,' to use Freire's terms. In explaining what he means by dialogics Freire writes

'Within the word [the essence of dialogue itself] we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed - even in part - the other immediately suffers. There is no true word which is not at the same time a praxis.'

There is a footnote to this last sentence which reads

Action } word=work=praxis

Reflection }

Sacrifice of action = verbalism

Sacrifice of reflection = activism

(Freire 1972 p60)

It is the involvement of everyone (or everyone who wants to be involved in a free society) in a dialogue about *praxis* that distinguishes *working with the wisdom of the congregation* from other forms of lay training.

My own praxis has been influenced by Reg Wickett, who, in *How to use the Learning Covenant in Religious Education: Working with Adults*, (1998) argues for trainers and teachers to regard themselves as mentors for adults, who in conversation about the demands of the situations they find themselves in, direct their own learning, even their own assessment of the success of that learning. I have transposed his methods from the individual adult to the adult community, in particular, using his method of questioning rather than teaching, if teaching means providing the answers (Wickett 1998). This method is a powerful way of developing responsibility and motivation by making them pre-conditions (assumptions) for learning to happen at all. In addition to responsibility and motivation *working with the wisdom of the congregation* makes cooperation an integral part of the learning process.

Direct and indirect communication in learning

The point I have just made is one example of an indirect communication. An attempt at a direct communication of the need to be 'responsible, motivated and cooperative' would be an exhortation to that effect. To structure learning in a way that it can hardly happen without responsibility, motivation and cooperation is a powerful indirect communication.

Kierkegaard in *Training in Christianity* discusses the importance of the indirect communication of faith and spiritual insight if it is to become an essential part of a person rather than something they merely know about (Kierkegaard 1941). Bishop Butler in his sermon on the text 'Thou art the man' (2 Samuel 12.7 AV) reflects on the power of the prophet Nathan's parable (an indirect communication) to enable King David to recognize the enormity of what he had done, overcoming the self-deception that permitted him to do such things in the first place. A direct communication of the accusatory kind 'You have committed adultery and murder!' would not have

reached the self deception which Butler identifies as the root of the problem (Butler 1949). Indirect communication - facilitated most often by questions, parables and alternative narratives - frequently enables a sense of discovery to accompany the learning. In this respect Parish Development is primarily an example of indirect communication. Direct advice is rarely, if ever, offered.

The development of new resources

Two significant resources make *working with the wisdom of the congregation* possible:

1 The general standard of education. We take it for granted that almost everyone can read; while this assumption is not universally justified, most people can join in a discussion if the group is small enough and the questions relate to themselves.

2 The development of new methods of consultation and decision making which involve as many people as possible on an equal footing. I think particularly of Open Space Technology (Owen 2008); of the methods discussed in *Creating the Future Together* (Mead and Alban 2008) which include Future Search, Appreciative Inquiry, and World Cafe; as well as the methods employed now in my own practice. The way people learn is as significant for the well being of a community as what is learned.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations which apply to *researching this practice* include obtaining permission from the congregations and people involved, protecting their anonymity, representing my findings in a way that will help and not harm them, and keeping my data in a secure way. I have sought and received approval from the University Ethics Panel, obtained permission from the parishes, and the individuals who consented to be interviewed and those who completed the questionnaires. In addition I submitted all the written evidence included in this dissertation to a workplace supervisor who is a senior member of diocesan staff, for their judgment about whether the inclusion of particular pieces of information or opinions were likely to do more harm than good..

The helpfulness of my workplace supervisor extends way beyond a simple editing or censorship; I have valued especially the chance to discuss aspects of these case studies in relation to information or reports that have come to me otherwise than in the open process of data collection. Some of the things I have been told fall into Sims' category of pious myths, which includes gossip. This experience has shown me that not only did I need an ethical policy for research reporting, I also needed an ethical policy for the conduct of the training process itself. Some of these stories were not trivial, but I adopted the policy of ignoring any information that was not open to everyone. I took the view that my task was to focus on the basic challenge facing the congregation; to have been sidetracked by such matters would have given them a prominence they did not deserve, and opened up issues I could not have handled in this kind of process. (Within the set up of the Church of England there are other people better placed to deal with such things if that becomes necessary.) I do understand that for aggrieved parties such stories would have been significant features of their participation in the congregation, and that they might feel obliged to deny the false or distorted reports. Nevertheless, they remain pious myths for the congregation as a whole, very important to a few people but not central to the matter in hand.

Making Research Manageable

This pattern of training has been employed, as already mentioned, by above sixty different parishes in different parts of England. To try to include them all would make the research project unmanageable. I therefore chose four case studies to be representative of the range of applications Parish Development is able to respond to. I chose the four to represent a range of difficulties from the relatively straightforward to the very demanding; a range of situations from normal changes to crisis situations; and a range of challenges which included a way of organizing and resourcing discussions about parishes sharing clergy, a way of making difficult decisions and a resource for the induction of a new vicar into a parish.

I have tried not just to include 'success stories.' Parish Development has not always worked well with every congregation and every vicar. Some obvious 'failures' have occurred when priest and people were expecting the method to 'solve' a particular problem like attracting younger people to join them. But I am not aware of anyone reporting that a Parish Development consultation did more harm than good. The parishes selected also represent a social spread from advantaged to comparatively deprived areas.

I have obtained the consent of the parishes; all the individuals involved in interviews and in answering questionnaires have given consent, provided their anonymity was protected as far as possible. The descriptions of what happened and how people have reflected on what happened are treated as sufficient accounts in themselves. Specific details have been removed. Some events and situations are described in general terms.

Collecting evidence in three steps

The Parish Development pattern of training collects evidence as part of its method. Every intervention is written up, as far as possible, as a simple record of what happened in the training sessions. Thus material written on flip charts by members of the congregation are copied as they stand into the reports. This can make the reports difficult to appreciate for outsiders but for those who were present at all or most of the sessions they are relatively easy to understand. The material thus assembled is itself a form of Action Research (me working with the congregation to produce an up to date account of some aspects of its *shared practical* wisdom) and is a product of the training. This constitutes the initial evidence and will be reported and assessed in the first section of the next chapter.

It seemed an obvious and straightforward research method to ask the members of the congregations what they thought about what happened. This enabled some significant evidence to be collected, but the process was affected by suspicion and perhaps by a desire to respond in a way that pleased me. This evidence is reported and assessed in the second section of chapter five.

In order to try to gain some more 'objective' evidence, a questionnaire was devised around David Sims theory of the status of stories. The evidence collected in this way is presented and evaluated in the third section of the next chapter.

The first three sections have concentrated on what the congregation learned. The fourth section uses the lenses provided by Morgan's metaphors to produce yet more perspectives on 'what happened' in each of the case studies. This proves valuable, among other things, for understanding features of the parish-diocese relationship which is a factor in the case studies the analysis in the first three sections tends to overlook.

Chapter 5

The Evidence

This chapter presents the research data for the four chosen case studies, and its interpretation using the analytical lenses described in chapter four. The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first three focus on the evidence for what the congregations learned through their engagement with Parish Development. These sections present the evidence in the chronological sequence in which it was gathered:

- 1 The evidence of the initial reports
- 2 The evidence of interviews and conversations looking back on 'what happened.'
- 3 The results of a questionnaire designed to test the status of selected accounts of 'what happened.'

The fourth section assesses the data principally with the aid of Morgan's metaphors (which the congregations by and large did not find helpful) and from the standpoint of the diocese (represented initially by me as a diocesan training officer.)

1 The evidence of the initial reports

As has already been mentioned every congregation involved in a Parish Development consultation receives a written report which is simply a record of 'what happened.' Summaries of such reports for three of the case study parishes have already been provided at the end of chapter two, following the description of the methods used in this training process. What follows here under the headings 'The story of parish X' is a narrative produced by me based on these reports and on other information in the public domain. It is the same as the 'basic account' used in the questionnaire (described in section 3 below.) It was written in a way that tries to suppress the identity the parish concerned, following principles mentioned in the Preface, without unduly distorting the basic data. These reports are addressed initially to the members of the congregation, inviting them to agree or correct what is written. Consequently they are written in what Coghlan and Brannick (2010) describe as a 'second person voice' reporting on what 'we co-created' rather than in the more objective sounding 'third person voice' addressed to an third party audience.

The story of parish A

My involvement with parish A consisted of two stages: first, a standard Parish Development consultation (of the kind I have conducted in a large number of parishes), and second, facilitating a process designed to help in making a major decision. I then note subsequent events, though I had no direct involvement in them.

1 The Parish Development Consultation showed that

(a) the parish story was one of a steady contraction in staff, and in activities since the second World War. Immediately after the war there were two church buildings and two clergy to run them as parallel organizations. In due course only one vicar was available to run both churches and the practice of alternating services between the churches began. During this time a large old Vicarage was sold and a new one built, and a new Church Hall was opened midway between the two church buildings.

(b) the numerical size of the congregation is on the small side of medium, indicating that it is difficult to maintain all the activities the parish has been used to with fewer people.

(c) the dominant purpose of the parish in the opinion of members was to provide worship in the context of a fellowship of mutual support. There is a desire to increase involvement with serving the needs of the wider community, together with an awareness of limited resources for doing this.

(d) the shared outlook is practical and down to earth, with a desire to learn and discover (rather than simply follow rules and regulations.)

(e) most people feel the congregation is just 'over the hill' on a notional life cycle which amounts to the sense of needing a new start without being clear what such a new start would be.

(f) the 'feel' of the church, and its location are important factors for members.

Nevertheless, there was a strong sense that all this was more or less irrelevant because it failed to address a very pressing issue. So a second series of meetings were arranged in order to facilitate -

2 Making a difficult decision, though it was not immediately clear how to define the decision that had to be made. In part it was to do with finance - it was becoming increasingly difficult to pay the quota, and the cost of keeping the buildings in good repair, especially one of them which had reached a critical position, would be impossible without outside help ("Maintenance"). In part it was a question of whether the parish still needed two church buildings - we could do most of what we do with just one building, which would enable us to save money and concentrate our efforts on mission, and building up the congregation ("Mission".)

The process we followed helped to clarify the issues and to assemble much of the information we needed in order to make an informed choice. The choice turned in the end on whether we should close one of the church buildings. We could see that each church had its own significance for members of the congregation (and probably for other parishioners too) so that closing a church threatened seriously to damage the unity of the congregation. We could also see that "maintenance versus mission" might be a false opposition - maintaining church buildings could be a vital part of our

mission. Either way - keep or close - would mean losers as well as winners, though we did not want to express it in quite these competitive terms. In the end the consensus came down on keeping the two churches.

The process seemed long and drawn out to some, but it did enable a thoroughness which would not have been possible with a quick decision.

3 Subsequent events: *the PCC (as the legally responsible body) decided to work to raise the money in order to keep both churches. (This fund raising seems to be going well.) The vicar decided to move on, and the diocese has decided that the parish should now be staffed as a half time post.*

(The pattern of exercises we followed together in the Parish Development Consultation is spelled out in my *Workbook* page 5ff and the pattern for Making a difficult decision is *Workbook* page 61 ff. Participants all had a copy of these pages as a simple A5 booklet.)

| Stage | Number of meetings | Number of participants | Length of Report or nature of information |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Parish Development Consultation | 4 meetings totaling 8 hours | 29 average about 25 | 17 pages (A4) |
| Making a difficult decision | 5 meetings totaling 10 hours | average about 22 | 21 pages (A4) |
| Subsequent events | - | - | public domain |

Table 5.1 listing the Data/information gathering underlying the account for parish A

This indicates that 38 pages of Report (18 hours of meeting) have been summarized into just over 650 words.

The story of parish B

I have been involved with parish B on three occasions over several years. It began with

1 A standard Parish Development consultation which concluded that

- (a) the parish story was basically one of ordinary ups and downs
- (b) that the numerical size of the congregation was on the large side of medium and was probably at about the upper limit of what the present organizational pattern could support
- (c) that the dominant purpose of the church was to provide worship and a fellowship of mutual support, with a modest pressure to increase service to the wider community. The different purposes co-existed in a reasonable balance
- (d) that the dominant shared outlook was one that valued education and attempts to understand situations and people (in contrast to following rules and regulations), coupled with a general sense that things would turn out well
- (e) that the 'feel' of the church is a very important factor for members; this includes being welcoming and non-judgmental.

The general reaction to this consultation was that

- it was a worthwhile thing to do
- that the main things that happened included an increased trust and understanding between people, and a greater confidence in doing what we were already doing
- that it was worth asking for the next consultation

2 A request to help in planning for a Vacancy at the Vicarage which involved using a step by step shared reflection on what would be needed.

This resulted in specific plans being made to cover

- Occasional Offices
- The Wider Community
- Church Community (Congregation)
- Worship
- Buildings

Co-ordination and communications

The general response to this work was that

- it was well worth doing in this open way, involving many people (not just the few)
- it helped everyone appreciate how many things needed to be kept in mind and how many things different people did already
- it engendered a sense of shared responsibility for the organizing of the vacancy.

In the event the vacancy was judged to have been well organized. It lasted longer than expected for reasons people could appreciate (illness holding up the patron's work; the first interviews failing to find a suitable candidate.)

There was disappointment that some folk stopped coming during the vacancy (was this for good? or to avoid being asked to help?) but on the whole most people pulled together in an encouraging way. There was a distinct sense of relief, and exhaustion, when the next Vicar was appointed.

3 A Training the new Vicar course which was in many ways a repeat of the first consultation. It reported

(a) broad agreement that the parish story was one of ordinary ups and downs but added three things - the bitterness following the closure of the daughter church some thirty years ago; mixed reactions at first to both children receiving communion, and to the appointment of a woman vicar, reactions which are now positive.

(b) size (and implications) unchanged

(c) the balance of purposes - or at least the perception of it - had changed since the first consultation. It now sensed a much higher proportion of people who came for "Just worship and not much else", in the sense they did not want to become involved in helping with the organization of church life. This could relate to the disappointment felt at those who stopped coming during the vacancy, or it could be a clearer perception of what is the case.

(d) the same general outlook obtains

(e) a new 'stages on a life cycle' exercise revealed the desirability of reflecting on the handing on of responsibilities from one generation to the next

(f) 'feel' remains very important.

The general reaction to this was that

- it was helpful for the new vicar to experience these exercises at first hand (and not merely read about them)
- it helped to clarify the context in which several priorities could be identified and new initiatives planned.

| Stage | Number of meetings | Numbers attending | Length of Report or nature of evidence |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Initial Consultation | 4 meetings totaling 8 hours | 33 | 7 pages (A4) |
| Planning for the vacancy | 3 meetings totaling 6 hours | average about 28 | 12 pages (A4) |
| Training the new vicar | 4 meetings totaling 8 hours | average about 12 | 13 pages (A4) |

Table 5.2 listing the Data/information gathering underlying the account for parish B

This indicates that 32 pages of Report (22 hours of meeting) have been summarized into about 650 words

The story of Parish C

I have been involved in a modest way with some of what has happened in parish C over several years, (though some key happenings have simply been things I have learned about afterwards.)

1 An initial Parish Development consultation which concluded that

(a) the Parish story contained a whole number of significant events, (though nothing that deserved to be called a trauma), including a new vicarage, a new parish centre, changes in staff and the illness of a former vicar.

(b) the numerical size of the congregation is on the larger side of medium, which suggests that the present organizational pattern may not be able to sustain any increase in numbers.

(c) the balance of purposes revealed a complex picture. The sense of where the parish is at the time of the consultation placed being a family first (38%), serving the wider community second (27%), providing worship (and not much else) third (25%) and campaigning or being issue based fourth (10%). The balance between these purposes is quite difficult to maintain since it is near to being what I call a 30:30:30 church where no one purpose has sufficient support to flourish; making decisions becomes difficult because any proposal has only 30% support and 60% opposed or indifferent. The pressure for change, indicated by what you would like the balance to be is a small help: serving the community 39%, family 31%, campaigning 16% and Just worship at 14%, which is nearer to a 40:40 church with two rival purposes - somewhat easier to hold in balance.

(d) the dominant outlook of the congregation was judged to be one which combined the realistic and pragmatic with a desire to understand and learn more, and an expectation that things are likely to turn out well.

(e) the 'feel' of the church, its symbolic role in our lives, is a most significant factor.

"Although not explicitly mentioned in the story accounts, a loss of former members came up in discussion."

2 A Second Parish Development Consultation which included work on three selected problems or challenges

This second consultation took place just over two years later in a context of anxiety about what was happening in the parish which included a loss of former members (size is now medium, i.e. less than it was), and a reluctance to stand for the PCC or for office. In a brief review of what the first consultation had revealed we revisited the balance of purposes as most likely to provide insight into the situation. The perception of the balance of purposes had hardly changed - indeed the result for what people would like the balance to be was almost identical to that two years earlier.

We made a comprehensive list of all the things that we did under the different 'purpose' headings and then worked in more detail on three themes

1. How to improve our mutual support of one another
2. How to find out about needs in the wider community
3. How to organize the relationship between the PCC and the various sub-groups

These each produced a list of practical suggestions. The third theme identified a dysfunctional PCC revisiting and ‘unpicking’ issues already discussed by its subgroups.

3 Important changes subsequently took place, including in particular, the decision of the vicar to move on, and the appointment of a new vicar.

4 Observations of developments in the parish. My third involvement following the appointment of a new vicar, involved attending at least two PCC meetings and preaching one Sunday morning on the theme of Parish Development. I suggested that a version of Open Space Technology might be an appropriate way of gathering ideas since everyone could participate on an equal basis. This event happened (without me) and a written record was produced which was turned into a comprehensive plan of action with goals, timescales and membership all clearly identified.

| Stage | Number of meetings | Number of participants | Length of Report or nature of evidence |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Initial Consultation | 2 meetings totaling 6 hours | 17 | 8 pages (A4) |
| Second Consultation | 1 meeting totaling 5 hours | 10 | 8 pages (A4) |
| <i>Important changes</i> | - | - | public domain |
| Observations | 2 meetings totaling 6 hours | (PCC meetings) | personal notes and memory |
| (Event without me) | 1 meeting | unknown | 17 pages (A4) |

Table 5.3 listing the Data/information gathering underlying the account for parish C

This indicates that 33 pages of Report (plus notes) or 20+ hours of meeting have been summarized in about 650 words.

The story of a consultation for parishes D, E and F

I was involved in designing and facilitating an event intended to help these three parishes decide whether a suggestion that they might work more closely with each other was worth pursuing.

The basic suggestion, which had been known about in the area for several years, was that the three parishes which covered the same general social and geographical area, might come to be served by two rather than three stipendiary clergy. This was in the context of an ongoing discussion in the diocese and deanery about how parishes in the future could be served by fewer clergy (because nationally fewer clergy would be available.) It also came at an opportune time since the three incumbents involved were expected to retire within a few years of each other. As I understood the situation the deanery had no other suggestions for reducing clergy numbers at the time, and both the deanery and diocesan pastoral committees were keen to know whether this suggestion should become a definite policy.

The event I designed invited folk from all three parishes (as many as could come - no restrictions) to take part in a day conference in two parts:

In the morning the three parishes worked in parallel using Parish Development exercises to identify their story, their numerical size, the balance of purposes within their church, their outlook and the stage they felt they were on a life cycle.

In the afternoon they worked in mixed groups sharing the results of the morning's work to help identify areas of potential harmony and potential difficulty.

As it happened there were distinct similarities and some significant differences: all three parishes felt they were primarily about providing worship in the context of a fellowship of mutual support, and all three aspired to do more to serve the needs of the local community; two parishes were medium size and one was large; two parishes shared the same general outlook, valuing vision and challenge while the third looked in a significantly different direction regarding itself as pragmatic and down to earth; each parish had a

rather different view of where it might be on a life cycle curve - one was still developing toward maturity, another had a mix of youthfulness and the beginning of decline, while a third saw itself as being just over the hill; the three parish stories were naturally rather different but none had an exceptional feature (like a trauma or a golden age in the past.)

The mixed groups came up with slightly different conclusions about their compatibility, but the initial impression was that although the exercise had not identified any major obstacles, this was because it had not included the category of Churchmanship for at least one parish, and that another parish felt it was being treated (or likely to be treated) as a junior partner to be taken over.

The outcome of the event was the rejection of the suggestion as it stood ("not these three") by one of the parishes, but acceptance of the principle of reducing clergy numbers by the same parish seeking an alternative partner. The other two parishes did not then need to consider the suggestion further.

(My professional opinion is that the parish with the pragmatic outlook would find it very difficult to work with the other two more visionary parishes, and vice versa; but this opinion was not asked for or given at the time. Since this parish is the one seeking an alternative partner I approve of the outcome for reasons which include this opinion.)

The deanery and diocese are pursuing the question of how best to reduce clergy numbers with the help of new published guidelines from the Bishop, but this particular suggestion is no longer under serious consideration

The Data/information gathering underlying this account needs an explanation rather than a table; the event took place on a single Saturday beginning at 9.30am and ending soon after 3pm. A special 12 page Workbook was produced for the occasion which included prayers and hymns; the training material is very similar to the material provided in my *Workbook* (Impey 2009b). 75 people attended from the three parishes; the morning sessions were facilitated by three different people, but the results which were

produced in rather different formats by each parish were eventually conflated by me into a single page diagram for the report using the conventions of the *Workbook*. This is reproduced as Figure 3 on page 101. The rest of the report consists of a table comparing the views of the 'mixed' groups about the implications of these results tabulated under three headings. (The framework for this table was provided in the Workbook that every participant had.)

1. Similarity suggests we may well work well together

2. Our differences could prove a fruitful tension

3. Our differences are significant enough to make us very cautious

The mixed groups completed this table in quite different ways. One chose to award 'stars'; more stars to the possibility they thought most likely, one or none to the others. Another used smiley and glum faces, and another distributed ticks (=correct) while others used words with comments like 'probably not an issue' or 'We don't need to be clones of each other.' An awkward feature of the mixed group responses were the objections to the categories used in the morning - 'What about Churchmanship? Worship Style? Leadership? Evangelism?' written on the table in different places; awkward because it was difficult to assess their relation to the three column topics.

Additional evidence consists of a clear memory of one parish expressing frustrations about how they were regarded (which is not evident in the written material.)

This material is summarized in 620 words which most people later agreed was a satisfactory account.

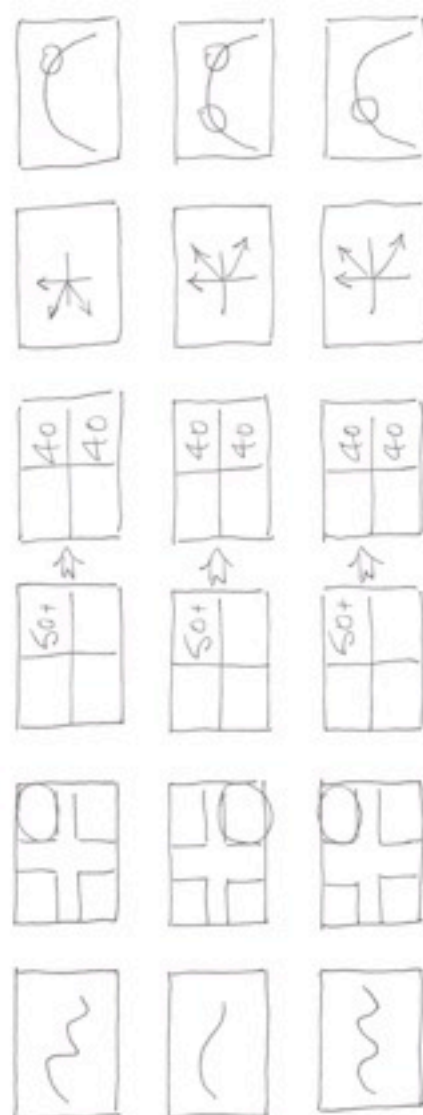


Figure 3 A diagrammatic representation of the contrasts between parishes D, E and F
Such diagrams are regularly drawn in Parish Development consultations. They are more or less self evident when read with the Parish Development questions. The areas for 'special attention' are clear.

Preliminary reflections on ‘what happened’

I offer the following observations which I believe are clear at this stage.

- The participants found the Parish Development method easy enough to engage with, and understood the questions they were invited to address,
- Although the summary accounts do not emphasize the emotions which accompanied some of the proceedings, the frustrations felt by some members of Parish A (‘a strong sense that this was more or less irrelevant’) and parishes D,E and F (‘not included the category of Churchmanship....being treated (or likely to be treated) as a junior partner to be taken over’) hint at the frustration felt, but also reveal that such emotions and opinions could be voiced, and that other issues were allowed to emerge. (The training did not present a rigid syllabus to be followed; it was not a straightjacket.)
- Many more people than is usually the case were able to participate in the discussion of issues and policies affecting the life of the congregations concerned. (Only in Parish C do the numbers approximate to the number of PCC members, which was due to the events being advertised as ‘open meetings of the PCC’.)
- New categories are introduced for understanding the tensions and difficulties inherent in being a congregation. In particular tensions which are often interpreted as ‘personality clashes’ or things that can be blamed on individuals, are revealed in a different and more adequate light. (The 30:30:30 diagnosis for Parish C, for example, remains a challenge for the congregation even with a new vicar.)

All the training events reported in this section took place prior to my asking permission to use the parishes concerned as case studies in my research. The written reports referred to were made widely available to members of the congregations concerned; at least in that local sense, they were in the public domain.

2 The evidence of interviews and conversations looking back on ‘what happened.’

I began collecting evidence about the impact of Parish Development with the case study parishes by trying to ask the participants in a straightforward way what they thought had been learned through the process. I now regard these as ‘unstructured conversations’ when compared with the more obviously structured questions in the Questionnaire which are the subject of the next section. I report in this section on the evidence of these conversations and interviews with the parishes in turn, beginning in each case with a table listing the evidence collected.

| Type of conversation | Quantity | Nature of the record |
|---------------------------------------------|----------|-------------------------------------|
| with the PCC seeking permission to research | 1 | notes taken immediately afterwards |
| Interviews with individuals | 2 | Sound recording plus detailed notes |
| Interview with group of three | 1 | Sound recording plus detailed notes |

Table 5.4 listing Unstructured research conversations with members of Parish A

| Type of conversation | Quantity | Nature of the record |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Supportive conversations during the process about particular anxieties/ events | several, with several participants, mostly over the phone | memory (some transient issues, others ‘confidential’) |
| with a colleague involved in the training | several | memory and notes |
| Informal remarks of participants during the training process | several, with several participants | memory |
| my own intuition | | memory |

Table 5.5 listing Related conversations with members of Parish A

Unstructured research conversations with members of Parish A

To begin with the evidence of what I have called ‘related conversations’: These all occurred around the training events and inevitably influence my perception of what happened and what was happening at the time. They constitute ‘weak’ evidence in as much as there is very little objective material for an outsider to examine, but they nevertheless comprise an important part of my own perceptions and judgements as a participant in the process, (myself as a significant tool in my research, so Swinton and Mowat (2006)). I have already referred to the two conditions I make (everyone invited, no briefing. These are made on every occasion, but in this case it is important to underline that I was definitely not involved *in order to negotiate the closure of one of the church buildings*. My intuition at the time, and evidence collected through the questionnaire later, tells me that some participants believed that I was. I learned specifically that they had oral evidence that a previous incumbent had admitted that ‘the diocese would have liked them to try to close one of the churches.’ This in particular, but much else that I ‘learned’ through these related conversations I classify, following Sims, as ‘pious myths’ which nevertheless throw useful light on some features of what happened. In the case of Parish A I was involved in many more peripheral conversations than is normally the case in Parish Development training. This was a symptom of the difficulty of the decision the parish was faced with, and the strength of the feelings involved.

Can I assess the impact of these peripheral conversations on the eventual outcome? I did sense, as one can sometimes in pastoral conversations, that my willingness to listen and to engage in such conversations was able to ease the pain that some people felt other people had inflicted, or were inflicting, on them. Occasionally I listened to both sides of such painful interactions. I did not seek to mediate any direct reconciliations, partly because no one suggested that they were looking for such a thing, but principally because it would have distracted from my main purpose which was to build up the Body of Christ by *working with the wisdom of the congregation*.

My intuition tells me that these kinds of conversations, together with my functioning as an external facilitator, enabled the final decision to be reached with less pain and turmoil than would have been the case had the parish been left to face this decision on its own.

My colleague in the training process (a lay person with considerable experience and skill in industrial negotiations) was sure that the congregation were being 'unrealistic' in wanting to hold onto things as they were.

As to the unstructured research conversations:

My meeting with the PCC asking for permission to treat them as a case study was itself instructive. Apart from discussions about safeguarding anonymity, they raised the question of whether my research would be a help or hindrance to what they now felt they had to do. Would I be 'raking over' in an unhelpful way issues that had now been decided and from which they needed to move on? Would I be wasting their time? One or two people indicated that while they would not be opposed to my research they would 'not have time' to be interviewed. It showed me very forcibly that research is also an intrusion into the ongoing life of a parish which needs to be conducted with courtesy and respect.

It is quite possible that there may have been an underlying suspicion in this case that I was actually trying to get them to reverse their decision. Those who declined to be interviewed belonged to the majority who felt the right decision had been made; those who volunteered to be interviewed were either 'open minded' or belonged to those who regretted the decision. This influenced the nature of the interview material. The two interviews with individuals were with people who broadly regretted the decision; the group of three could be described as 'open minded' in that they were content to go along with the decision, but might have been content had it gone the other way.

These interviews provided a number of stories which Sims would classify as pious myths; not because they were in any sense 'untrue' but because they arose for people who viewed events from a minority position and with a minority perspective. To some extent they might appear as 'complaints,' or

criticisms of what the majority were prepared to accept. One such concerned the readiness to bypass standard decision making processes like faculty legislation or planning permission, another concerned perceived pressure being placed on anyone who might dissent so that

it was best to keep quite - if they did speak up they would only get put down.

From this viewpoint the tangled politics of parish life was both prominent and frustrating. For people coming with presuppositions drawn from standard procedures in industry (in one case), and from experience of another church which clearly placed the priority of mission way above the maintenance of buildings (in another), what was happening in Parish A was perplexing to say the least. To amplify these points would endanger anonymity and distract from more important matters, but the importance of these things to those concerned is beyond doubt.

The group of three included in their reflections memories of what church was like in the past

[as children we had to] sit still - move a muscle and you were stabbed in the back!

In the old days clergy were treated like aristocracy; we had to do what the vicar wanted, whether we agreed or not [now] if we don't agree we don't say, we just don't turn up.

(This last comment is especially illuminating, especially if 'we don't turn up' is widened to include 'we don't cooperate'.)

The subsequent experience of the vacancy showed one member in particular

just how much there is to be done [in running a parish]

and there was some scepticism expressed about whether the parish would be able to raise the money needed in time.

As for the experience of the training process

we have changed a lot

pulling together again now

we got it discussed, brought it out, got things aired

learned things you didn't think of yourself,

listened to each other

talked about things more than you would have done

helps belonging

The content of what might have been learned is not mentioned (possible 'content' might have included the balance of purposes, or the requirements

for closing a church). That may not be especially important since memories of learning encounters tend not to dwell on content, but the sense that real progress was made in understanding one another is clear. (This would count as interpersonal level learning within the organization.)

Unstructured research conversations with members of Parish B

| Type of conversation | Quantity | Nature of the Record |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Reflection on the first Parish Development | 1 | Written document (single page) |
| Interviews with one person two people four people twelve people | 1 1 1 1 | Sound recording and notes |
| Informal conversations | several | memory |

Table 5.6 listing Unstructured research conversations with members of Parish B

The first document listed was provided soon after the first Parish Development event as a response to a request for feedback. It reported

The Parish Development process [...] was very enjoyable and worth while. The whole process was not remotely threatening - it was encouraging and affirming. In this respect it was certainly rather different from many other diocesan initiatives! Overall we ourselves were able to do the necessary thinking and working things out, and so we were involved in making the discoveries ourselves.. The areas which perhaps need attention were identified gently. There were no aspects of the meetings which we found difficult to understand - everything was clear and very 'user friendly.' The whole process was helpful and illuminating. If there has been any difference in how we do things now, it is perhaps that we do much as we did but more confidently - even more enthusiastically! Knowing that what we are doing is 'OK' brings things to life! I also think relationships within the parish are improved. People are more friendly and open: less defensive. With regard to 'the next stage' it might be that we need to be 'challenged', not just for the sake of it, but when particular circumstances demand it. This might be when the parish faces new situations, such as the building of new housing estates, or when planning for an interregnum. Then we know help is available.

This response to Parish Development needs to be set in the context of a parish which did not feel it was facing any kind of crisis (in contrast to the other case study parishes.) The interviews which took place following the story reported above generally endorsed the mood and specifics of this first response

[the training] prepared us well for the vacancy, very well

It made a huge difference - all learned a lot. Each of us had a role to play to keep everything going.

We sailed along in the vacancy - everybody pulled together, it drew people together it was more of a challenge than a burden.

It isn't easy for [the new vicar] [the previous vicar] found it hard - there was a lady who ran everything and lots who were difficult.

We concentrated on the vacancy and relaxed when the new vicar came in, but its difficult to adapt to somebody else - mainly personality - needs time to settle in.

People don't like change [but] accept that things change. [At a recent event] there were four vicars together - it was wonderful - no feeling it was better with [them] - different, but not necessarily better or worse

Some criticisms were made of the system

no business would allow a vacancy of sixteen months

but otherwise there were no serious criticisms voiced. In general the whole experience was felt to have been positive and the Parish Development training had made a valuable contribution.

Unstructured research conversations with members of parish C

| Type of conversation | Quantity | Nature of the record |
|----------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|
| planning and supportive with first vicar | several | memory |
| planning and supportive with second vicar | several | notes and emails |
| with PCC after the appointment of the second vicar | two occasions | notes |

Table 5.7 listing Unstructured research conversations with members of parish C

There is less data for parish C mainly because the training interventions were only one factor among many in what happened, and because my involvement was channeled through the PCC and 'open meetings of the PCC' rather than directly with the congregation itself.

A third party report on the first Parish Development exercise with Parish C is printed on page 49 of *Faithful Cities* (Commission on Urban Life and Faith 2006). This report functions more as an alternative account of what was taught than as a reflection focussing on what has been learned. (Many teachers have to reflect ruefully on the difference between 'this is what I taught' and 'this is what they learned'.)

The conversations with the first vicar all took place prior to any intention to include the parish as a case study in my research, and are only recorded in my memory. Even though this is very 'soft data' it plays a part in my perception of 'what happened' and belongs to a type of conversation that I have had with a good number of clergy over many years in my role as a training officer. I gained the distinct impression that here was a vicar struggling with matters that were very difficult for them to understand. It was a managerial equivalent of someone else struggling to understand the calculus in mathematics, or the principles of improvisation in jazz music. Part of my early training involvement was an attempt to discover from my limited vantage point whether the congregation was able to support and work with such a limitation (an important kind of inability) in its vicar. As the story makes clear, this did not happen.

The subsequent conversations were inextricably bound up with 'what to do now' in a context of discernible reluctance to examine the recent past. The PCC nevertheless invited my continuing participation (itself an important endorsement of the value they put on the work we had done together). Appreciation was voiced in terms of finding

what you had to say about congregational wisdom was very interesting

but the focus was on how to move on. As the story above indicates they adopted some key features of Parish Development methods in the way they chose to make progress, and did most of this work without my direct

involvement, which is a significant measure of success for a method that seeks to avoid dependency.

The second vicar singled out the significance for them of understanding the 30:30:30 nature of the congregation's purposes. Otherwise there was a distinct reluctance to address the value of my involvement in any detail; it helped, it didn't do any harm.

Unstructured research conversations with members of parishes D,E and F

| Type of conversation | Quantity | Nature of the record |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| with clergy from the parishes planning the event | several meetings | Memory and notes leading to the plan of the event |
| with training colleagues | briefing about method before, observations during, feedback afterwards | memory and notes |
| with participants on the day | several | memory and notes |
| post event feedback from individuals and one meeting with the clergy | notes of the meeting, 6 emails from four people | notes and emails |

Table 5.8 listing unstructured research conversations with members of parishes D,E and F

Although the training involvement with D,E and F was concentrated on an event that only lasted one day it was a complex happening. The proposal that these three parishes should work more closely together and probably share clergy had been around for several years; the question about whether this should become a firm policy was brought to a head by the appointment of an interim minister to one of the parishes, together with the desire of the Pastoral Committees of the Deanery and Diocese (who have responsibility

for making such recommendations to the Bishop) to reach a firm decision. My meetings with the clergy led to the proposal that we explore the possibility with members of the congregations concerned using a matching exercise that I had devised within Parish Development. I emphasized that the matching exercise was designed to point up significant matters for discussion in the minds of those who would be directly involved rather than being a device for making a firm decision.

Conversations with colleagues involved in facilitating the training included a degree of puzzlement at why this proposal should arise at all, since it involved three apparently viable parishes. (We were much more familiar with proposals that involved 'struggling' or 'weaker' or even 'failing' parishes).

Remarks on the day included appreciation that so many people were invited to be involved in thinking about such a policy, and a sense that it was good to meet face to face with 'the others.'

Post event feedback included several different observations. Most people were content with the way the day was organized and with its immediate outcomes. One person (with a professional background in training) provided a detailed response

I really appreciated your personal style. You came across as unbiased, interested and a "safe pair of hands". For me, at least, it helped put me into a positive frame of mind for the exercise.

The basic structure of being separate and then together worked well – we certainly uncovered things about our church in the morning which were news to many.

The focus on "under the surface" issues was good – as you pointed out these are things that might otherwise not get looked at. I found the story and purpose elements the most helpful and using the purpose element to identify pressure for change was very interesting.

The use of "neutral" territory was a very good choice for the session

Just getting the three churches into the same place for a period of time must be a good thing! Thanks for organising it.

This same person underlined the importance for them of 'churchmanship' and also offered some useful observations about potential improvements if we were to do something similar again.

A few people felt their parish was incorrectly represented by its members

at least one representative from one of the other churches did not buy in to the morning's results for his church!

and one parish felt that

yet again we are being sidelined!

On the other hand the vicar of that parish reported

My church was relieved that it had had a voice and that voice was heard.

Retrenchment was no longer possible so in a way the day unlocked things for us and the diocese in our 'stuckness'. The day gave us courage to trust our instincts.

Although these responses provide important assessments about what had happened I sensed that for parishes C, and D, E and F in particular there was a sense that 'all that is behind us now,' and perhaps also that I was looking for compliments.

3 The evidence of a questionnaire designed to test the status of selected accounts of 'what happened.'

Devising a questionnaire based on Sims theory of the status of stories

As an attempt to improve the understanding of the impact of Parish Development training on the case study parishes I devised a questionnaire which was designed to explore the status of stories of what had happened, following the theory proposed by David Sims. I have already referred to his suggestion that different stories within organizations each have a status comparable to the status of sacred writings which are judged to be either canonic, apocryphal or pious myth. Organizational learning can be judged according to the change in status of different stories within an organization. Sims cites four criteria

- 1 Authoritative source
- 2 Experiential authority
- 3 The physical placing of the books
- 4 The view of leaders and other people

The authoritative source is a powerful factor. Theologians trained in the classical tradition are very familiar with this; for example, attributing the

authorship of the entire Pentateuch to Moses when critical study reveals that this could not possibly be the case, and the whole range of literature labelled Pseudepigrapha.²¹ Sims cites founder stories, and stories linked to powerful or charismatic figures within an organization as carrying this kind of authority. In congregations this factor is clearly in play, though the authority structure of a congregation may not coincide with the official structure: thus a new vicar does not usually have as much authority as a long standing churchwarden. Sims notes that myths are rarely attributed to an authoritative source, or when they are, they are beginning to be converted by the community to apocryphal or canonical status.

But experiential authority is probably an even more powerful factor. Some stories ring true and make sense, which gives them experiential authority. Sims focusses on the function of such stories rather than on their typical content: they are told to initiate new recruits, to establish the wisdom and authority of the storyteller, to help illuminate what is going on. In this context bizarre features in a story may not be believed but contribute in an important way to make the story memorable, and so keep it in circulation long enough for it to achieve apocryphal or even canonical status. The physical placing of scriptures (in Temples, in synagogues, or on lecterns) has its counterpart in the modern world with stories that appear in Newsletters, Parish Magazines, on official websites, or in annual reports. Sims notes that stories of this kind are often not taken very seriously: 'That's the official version - that's what they want us to believe.' More credibility is often given, ironically, to something overheard which points instead to an alternative account.

The fourth category concerns the view of leaders and other people. This is not so much an alternative source of authority as a recognition that the acceptance of stories is a 'social and distributed process, and not merely a matter of individual definition.' (Sims, 1999 p56). In formal structures, Sims suggests, a story which is given credence by most of the senior leaders is effectively canonical. But '[m]any of the more interesting stories, however,

²¹ The entry in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* under the heading of Pseudepigrapha includes the sentence: 'The attribution was generally for purposes of enhanced authority.' (Charlesworth 2005)

circulate on the basis of a lower level of official support' and represent organizational learning at the apocryphal level. In congregations 'the view of leaders and other people' is in my experiences affected by what people actually *want to believe* which is perhaps another way of saying which story they choose to be canonic. Thus, certain people who have come to be disliked for one reason or another have everything they do interpreted with a bias that is very clear to an observer: anything good they may do is 'surprising' or has an ulterior motive, anything bad is 'typical'. Thus people are placed in a double bind: whatever they do, they cannot win.

I produced for the questionnaire five contrasting accounts of 'what happened' with an open invitation to respondents to provide a further account of their own. My five accounts followed the same pattern for each case study.

A basic, neutral account

followed by four summaries labelled a - d

- a. An account based on the notion of 'normality'
- b. An account focussing on the notion of the wisdom of the congregation
- c. An account drawing on Morgan's metaphors for organizations
- d. An account highlighting the 'levels' of activity involved.

This was followed by an invitation to contribute an alternative account from the respondent's own perspective.

The questionnaire asked

Whether respondents agreed with the basic account

If not, what would they change or add

Which of the four summaries (a - d) they preferred

Whether they would reject any of them

Would they choose a different way of summarizing what happened and concluded by inviting

Any other comments.

A research tool which is also a pedagogical method.

The rationale of the questionnaire was to learn about the different status accorded to these deliberately contrasting accounts of what might be described as *the same thing*, that is to say, 'what happened.' At the same

time the questionnaire would discover the impact of presenting alternative accounts *as a research tool which is also a pedagogical method*.

By *pedagogical method* I mean that the mere presentation of alternative accounts takes it for granted that there can be alternative accounts, and that people will have their preferences. This may seem like a statement of the obvious, until an alternative assumption is encountered, namely, that there is one, and only one, correct or true account, so that all other accounts are necessarily false or distorted. The questionnaire invites a respondent to *add* a story, not *displace* one (or all of them.) The method is essential for an understanding of *the wisdom of the congregation* which balances, by holding together, the alternative stories which give wisdom its shape and content. The 'one true story' account is an attempt at *hegemony* which holds a community together by authority, in contrast to *koinonia* which holds a community together by the discipline of mutual love.

The basic account is based on the published reports of 'what happened' and uses as far as possible, the same vocabulary.²² The ones used in the questionnaires have already been presented at the beginning of this chapter.

The account based on the notion of 'normality' builds on the widespread use of the word 'normal' to describe the established and familiar *praxis* of a congregation. Without attempting to define at all precisely this normality, the account focusses on the sense that a congregation's normal life is either stable, or is questioned or threatened. The threat and questioning may come from within or without. Although the stable zone is at first sight clearly the happiest one to be in, it is not without its subtle dangers. Being stable is not the same as being creative or fully alive. Being stable for too long can easily lead to complacency and stagnation. The health of a congregation may profit from the discomfort of the questioning zone, or even being tested by having its existence threatened. The idea of locating the normal in one of these three zones, stable, questioned or threatened, is sufficient to provide the framework for an account of many important happenings in the life of local

²² I used the device of the 'Wordle Word Cloud' to make a visual check that significant words in the original reports played an equally significant role in my summary. See www.wordle.net

churches. Discerning how these categories apply to a particular congregation can assist worthwhile *learning*. What is already implicit in this analytical framework is that being in or imaginatively entering the questioned or threatened zones can be an incentive for learning in a way that a determination to stay in the stable zone is probably not. This is a perspective I devised myself.

The account focussing on the notion of the wisdom of the congregation highlights the results of the Parish Development exercises, and attributes the outcome of what happened to working with the wisdom of the congregation. It is an essentially complimentary and affirmative account, but compliments the congregation rather than any individual. It implicitly underlines the shared nature of responsibility for what happened.

The account drawing on Morgan's metaphors for organizations is significantly different. It draws on a few of the different metaphors which seemed to me to be relevant to an understanding of what happened in each case study, since the account had necessarily to be brief. It would in part be a test of the acceptability of more technical language.

The account highlighting the 'levels' of activity involved is by contrast relatively straightforward, based on the four levels used by Kessler and Bailey (2007) to distinguish the levels at which organizational wisdom operates. This would provide an opportunity to test the conclusion suggested by the first round of unstructured conversations that the biggest impact of the training occurred at the interpersonal level. It might also draw attention to important levels which had been ignored in what happened.

The invitation to contribute an alternative account from the respondent's perspective was an attempt to avoid excluding any other perspectives.

The response to the questionnaires

I distributed twenty copies of the printed questionnaire to each of the seven parishes, together with an electronic version. This was done via the PCC secretary and the vicar. This number meant that there would be approximately one copy for each of the original participants.

Parish A returned 10 completed questionnaires

Parish B returned only 3 together with a note that 'it may feel a long time since we met to talk about our parish'. (Nineteen different people had been involved in interviews.)

Parish C returned 4

Parishes DE and F returned 7 (at least one from each parish).

| Parish | Questionnaires sent | Questionnaires returned | Number involved in events |
|------------|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| A | 20 | 10 | average 24 |
| B | 20 | 3 | average 24 |
| C | 20 | 4 | 15 -20 |
| D, E and F | 60 | 7 | 70 |

Table 5.9 showing the quantity of responses to the questionnaires in each case study

Can these levels of response be regarded as significant? This is an appropriate point at which to assess the nature of my involvement with each of the four case studies, including its emotional intensity, for that affects people's willingness to engage with things that are now 'over and done with.'

In Parish A I accompanied the congregation through an intense and difficult decision making process which was followed by them taking on a very large amount of work raising money, at the same time as running the parish without a vicar. My involvement in the process was central to how it all worked out. Had I not been involved I am not sure what the decision would have been, but I do think the process would have been far more wounding to those involved on both sides. I mediated between the parties by providing and organizing the process whereby they made a major decision without tearing themselves apart. The request to complete the questionnaire came at a point when they recognized that I had no intention of trying to change the decision they had made. The ten returned questionnaires constitute significant extra data from those who initially declined to be interviewed.

In Parish B I accompanied the congregation through normal changes which all went normally. My involvement, though new, would count as part of normal life for the parish. They could have certainly managed without me, but I enabled them to organize what they had to do more effectively. I think the low level of return represents a sense that they had in fact 'done their bit' towards my research project (19 interviewees) and had moved on.

In the case of Parish C my involvement was to a large extent tangential to what happened, and although valued was certainly not crucial. The Parish Development exercises gave an important insight into the complexities of this parish, and provided a conceptual framework for understanding some of the issues that still face it. The few questionnaires that were returned are partly a reflection of how few people were actually involved in the process at any stage, and of how tangential it turned out to be. But as will be shown below what evidence they provide add some important insights into 'what happened' and to the value of the Parish Development diagnosis of a 30:30:30 church.

In parishes D, E and F my involvement was only a brief contribution to a complicated process which is not yet complete. It enable a good number of people to engage with something that potentially affects them, but since the outcome for all three parishes is not yet clear, judgment is reserved about its overall value. One parish grasped the initiative and came up with an alternative suggestion which was accepted. For the other two parishes the agenda is now quite different; what we did together changed things but there are now different matters to attend to. Consequently there is little energy to devote to clarifying what happened in the past. The few returns however do add something to the initial responses discussed earlier in this chapter.

The Questionnaire and alternative accounts of what happened in Parish A

The basic account is identical with that provided at the beginning of the chapter. The four summaries were

(a) A story of how the normality of the parish was threatened by the need to make a major choice (with the emphasis on what we regard as *normal*)

Normal for this parish means two churches. It also means a degree of financial difficulty, kept at bay until recently by drawing on financial reserves. Now that these reserves have all but gone, the choice of 'downsizing' and therefore saving money by closing one of the churches was seriously considered. But this would radically alter the normality of the parish and risk fracturing the unity of the modest congregation. The choice was made to stay with the normal, even though it would mean making a very considerable investment of time and energy in raising money. One unforeseen consequence of this decision was the subsequent diocesan decision to make the parish a half time clergy post, thereby changing an aspect of normality which had not been a subject of the congregation's deliberations.

(b) A story of how a parish chose a demanding course of action rather than what might seem an easier way that would save them time and money (with the emphasis on *working with the wisdom of the congregation*)

In many respects the efficient, even common sense thing to do for this parish was to close one of its churches in order to save money and have energy to build up the congregation. But the process of decision making we followed enabled *the wisdom of the congregation* to be voiced and heard, and led to a different conclusion; a commitment to do all the work needed to keep both churches in good repair. This *wisdom* is more than a judgment of what is most efficient: it includes an understanding of what we really care about and what we will commit ourselves to do (something an outsider would find very difficult to judge.)

(c) A story of how a *mechanistic* understanding competes with an *organic* understanding presided over by the congregation functioning like a *brain*

(with an emphasis on seeing which *metaphors for organizations* best help us understand what has happened)

A *mechanistic* understanding sees the main features of a parish as if they were a machine, so that ideally it should function efficiently (this metaphor would suggest that two church buildings for one modest size parish is 'inefficient'.) An *organic* understanding sees the main features of a parish as if it were a living being that does all it can to survive, especially in a hostile environment (this metaphor would liken closing a church to having a leg or arm amputated.) When the congregation was provided with a process which enabled it to reflect and weigh alternatives, it functioned like a *brain*, as it were using both hemispheres, allowing for emotion as well as logic.

(d) A story of a parish facing major *strategic and organizational* questions (using four levels within a congregation: *the individual, the interpersonal, the organizational, and the strategic*)

The choice facing this parish was a major one, certainly not an everyday choice (and had they chosen to close one of the churches it would have been a 'once in a lifetime' choice.) It was therefore largely unfamiliar territory for all concerned at the level of *strategy* or the long term future, and at the level of *organization* or the set up we need to do what we want to do. The process for making a difficult decision offered a way of engaging with these relatively unfamiliar levels for church congregations by recognizing their significance for the *interpersonal* and the *individual*.

When asked whether they agreed with the basic (first) account of what happened nine respondents said yes and one did not answer. Three qualified their agreement

only in parts

a reasonable account but a lot of time could have been saved

Yes but felt we did not learn anything about ourselves than we knew already

and offered these comments in response to the invitation to change the account

it was not the opinion of the majority to want to close a church

if the secretary of the DAC had been consulted earlier two years would have been saved

(The whole process lasted for fifteen months.)

| Summary | Preference | Rejection |
|--------------|----------------------------|-----------|
| (a) normal | 3 + 1 person who chose two | 1 |
| (b) wisdom | 7 | |
| (c) metaphor | 0 | 3 |
| (d) levels | 0 | 3 |

Table 5.10 showing the preferred summaries for Parish A

Metaphors and levels were rejected by one person because

they were expressed in academic language , not in a style parishioners would be familiar with

Another said

[metaphors] was not clear

This evidence suggests that, in Sim's terms, the basic account, the wisdom account and probably the normality account are regarded as canonic; it maybe that the normality account should be treated as apocryphal. But the metaphor and levels accounts clearly failed to resonate and must be judged to function as pious myths. They may however have significance for others, for example, the diocese and the academic community; a point I will argue later.

When invited to offer a different account, four declined, one even saying

No your descriptions are very good.

Two alternative accounts were offered under this heading

I felt on reflection that the meetings were called with the specific idea of closing [a] church... could have been very divisive... agreed to work together to keep both churches

and

The clergy at the time wasn't prepared in my opinion to put [their] whole self into the work involved in the parish and wanted to close [a] church without trying to gain funds

to renovate it, which is what the congregation wanted. Our progress and commitment to our churches shows [their] lack of vision and our willingness to work hard for our two churches will continue.

A similar point was made by someone else under the heading of Any other comments

From day one there was a lack of trust in the whole process by most of the people at the meetings. This was nothing to do with Rev Impey but the lack of trust in the parish priest ... the diocesan experts should have been brought in earlier ... Much of the interesting work by Rev Impey was lost because of this

while in contrast someone else claimed

it was by and large a biased (those feeling they had something to fight for) & minority 'congregation' attending the meetings. Some of those attending (and many of those not attending) living in fear of contradicting the 'power figures' in the congregation; this is, I think, a 'deeper picture' that was not necessarily evidenced in the process, which involved voluntary attendance at meetings and only enabled a minority to have some sort of voice. Significant others have since left.

These accounts all have in common the conviction that 'closing a church' was the central question, and imply that most people (if not everyone) came to the process with a clear idea of what they wanted the outcome to be.

There is a mutual view that coming to the process with the opposite bias spoiled the process by making it unfair in one way or another. My own view is that the 'time wasting' process enabled the issues to be discussed and discovered (there were a whole number of things we collectively did not know before the process about who decides what about church buildings for example) in a shared and reasonably civilized manner which would almost certainly not have happened had the issue been left to the PCC alone. The mutual suspicion and antagonism was not addressed directly, but indirectly reduced by organizing a pattern of discussion and decision making in which substantial questions of fact and consequence could be addressed.

The praise-blame framework which characterize the four comments just quoted is very common in all manner of communities, including churches. It functions powerfully in political debates of all kinds. Its weakness lies in at least two things: oversimplification of the issues, and lack of respect for those who differ from us. *Working with the wisdom of the congregation* enables congregational participants engaged in this process to acknowledge that they did not actually want either to oversimplify or to denigrate others. The

discussion of *noxiantes*, the things we want to avoid, is a specific heading in the decision making process; the full report of the discussions in this parish include wanting to avoid

- dividing the congregation and losing members
- staying put
- making new people feel a hindrance
- commercialism - too much emphasis on cash

but it is one thing to say things, its another to act on what you have said in the heat of argument. Before concluding this discussion I must quote another alternative account

This parish has been sorely failed by the negative support of the diocese for many years. It appears the decisions of the diocese are solely based on finance, the main reasons the parish has struggled in the past is due to unrealistic demands of the parish quota in relation to the congregation. The decision to retain our churches has been justified by the congregation pulling together, and making possible to repair the fabric of the buildings to provide for the future generations to come.

A further example of negativity of the diocese is to reduce the post of vicar to half a post making a most unattractive proposition of employment. This reveals a total lack of support for the congregation to "grow" in the future.

This example of a praise-blame account singles out the diocese rather than other members of the congregation. It would be possible, and possibly necessary, to defend the diocese against the charge of negativity, but stories constructed around a praise-blame framework undoubtedly play a significant part in the consciousness and wisdom of congregations. The process of *working with the wisdom of the congregation* in this case has placed this kind of account alongside other accounts (in this case, the basic, the wisdom and the normal) so that it is no longer the only account or necessarily the dominant story. These praise-blame accounts in Parish A are clearly apocryphal (more than pious myths) in that they have their supporters, but have not achieved canonic status if the results of the questionnaire are to be believed.

If a praise-blame account is an inadequate account from the viewpoint of theology and ethics, the practical theology methods of learning and organizing have the effect of sidelining such an account rather than defeating it directly. This is very significant for *koinonia* which does not eliminate

difference in order to be logically consistent but aims to hold difference in balance in community, which is a possibility for practice.

The remaining comments from the questionnaires endorsed the sense that the process wasted time, but also reported that the outcome was an improved working together.

The Questionnaire and alternative accounts of what happened in parish B

(a) A story of normal change, well managed (with the emphasis on what we regard as normal)

Although the vacancy involved a lot of extra work for members of the congregation, vacancies remain normal episodes in the normal life of a parish. This one was well managed partly due to the careful preparations made in advance in an open way which we could now regard as our normal way of doing things.

(b) A story of drawing on the wisdom of the congregation to organize what needed to be done (with the emphasis on *working with the wisdom of the congregation*)

No radical changes were proposed or made; perhaps some points mentioned in the second consultation (e.g. the bitterness felt etc) reflect a greater willingness to mention 'harder' matters than was the case at the beginning. The size of the congregation was basically maintained throughout the vacancy. The significance of the changed perception of the balance of purposes is yet to be worked out. The dominant outlook has been vindicated in what has happened. The feel of the congregation remains a vital touchstone.

(c) A story of a living organism using its brain to adapt to changes (with an emphasis on seeing which *metaphors for organizations* best help us understand what has happened)

The most appropriate metaphor for understanding this story is that of a biological organism (an animal or plant) that adapts well to changes in its

circumstances. The vacancy didn't threaten its existence - if anything it brought out strengths from within. A second metaphor of the parish as a brain highlights the willingness to think through and plan for the appropriate changes.

(d) A story of meeting challenges to the way we organize our life together (using four levels within a congregation: *the individual, the interpersonal, the organizational, and the strategic*)

The key challenge in this story concerns the *organizing* of our life together. We recognized that much of this happened because before the vacancy we thought the vicar organized it or presided over its organizing, and much of it involved patterns of communication and practice that those involved took for granted, but which others might not know about. The involvement of all those willing to take part in planning for the vacancy (involvement at an *interpersonal* level) enabled most of the organizational problems to be met positively. There was no special need to attend to the *strategic* level; we may assume that some attention was given to the needs of *individuals* (see planning for the Church Community (Congregation) above) though this was not specifically mentioned.

The small number of responses reduces their significance for adding to our understanding of what happened in Parish B but they all agree with the basic account and did not wish to change or add anything. They each preferred the normal account (a) and one person also liked the levels (d)

because I think the folk here like the vicar to do the strategic thinking but they are happy to organize putting it into practice. I think the vacancy was managed well because individuals knew what they had to do. The strategy was presented in the planning stage [...] Towards the end of the vacancy they were very worn out with the practical things and a bit worried about having to think through further strategy.

Two people would not reject any of the accounts but a third said

I don't like the biological image much (The metaphor account (c))

Nobody wanted to offer an alternative account.

These responses, such as they are, confirm that the canonic accounts of what happened (the basic and the normal) have no serious rivals, though

other perspectives can be happily accepted as well. This reflects the generally 'unproblematic' nature of what happened. The observations about strategy I will take up in my discussion of the implication of 'metaphors and levels' in due course.

The Questionnaire and alternative accounts of what happened in parish C

(a) A story of the normal life of the parish being severely threatened by internal breakdown (with the emphasis on what we regard as *normal*)

The normal life of the congregation is seriously threatened by the leaving of former members and the failure to find others willing to take on important official functions. The Parish Development Consultations fail to make a decisive contribution to solving this threat which is only resolved when the vicar moves on and a new vicar is appointed. The parish then moves back into normal life, using some of the processes associated with Parish Development.

(b) A story of the limits of local wisdom (with the emphasis on *working with the wisdom of the congregation*) Although the Parish Development consultation indicated two areas of challenge for the parish (the relationship between size and organizational structure, and the difficult balance of purposes) these insights by themselves were not sufficient to enable the decline in membership and participation to be resolved internally. Only when a new vicar was appointed (who was already familiar with Parish Development processes) was the wisdom of the congregation able to play its part in shaping the future of the parish.

(c) A story of a living organism in danger of bleeding to death being healed and set free to thrive again (with an emphasis on seeing which *metaphors for organizations* best help us understand what has happened)

The notion of the parish as a living organism, like an animal, bleeding severely is the most appropriate metaphor for understanding the predicament of the parish, unable by itself to stop the loss of blood. When the parish is healed - by the appointment of a new vicar - then the metaphor of the parish

as a brain becomes appropriate as it plans its future and thinks through its priorities.

(d) A story of failure at *organizational* and *interpersonal* levels which is rectified by a change of policy (using four levels within a congregation: *the individual, the interpersonal, the organizational, and the strategic*) The *organizational* failure includes the way the PCC “unpicked” the work of its own sub groups and failed to make decisions, or, to follow through decisions that were made. This in turn led to *interpersonal* breakdown in terms of the frustrations of individuals who then became reluctant to participate any longer. The position was improved considerably when it became clear that *individual* members views and contributions were going to be valued. The *strategic* level (long term future) which was threatened by the *organizational* breakdown was also improved.

The few replies make drawing conclusions difficult but what there is is nevertheless interesting. All three accepted the alternative accounts
it seems to me to be a fair and accurate account of what took place.

The alternative narratives about the situation are really interesting and stimulating. There’s something about all of them which rings true but I think, if pushed, I’d chose
(b) [the wisdom account.]

Another respondent preferred the metaphor account (c)

I think [this] is close to the position as I see it. I do not think we have yet really resolved the organisational issues, and I find that frustrating. But that is probably more my problem than the church’s!

One reply from someone who is a relative newcomer to the parish but now on the PCC said

it is useful background for me, and was referred to recently by the present incumbent, in discussion with our small Education Group (of which I am a member) in relation to our desire to increase interest in study groups/faith sharing groups. I can see the 30:30:30 church has problems!

The present incumbent reported separately that

the 30:30:30 diagnosis is incredibly useful

An alternative account was offered

If I had to try and write an alternative narrative, I think it would be along the lines of a congregational pathology of which the vicar was both symptom and cause. [the vicar] represented the last gasp of a Victorian romanticism (and complacency) about the mission and witness of the church. There was a section of the church to which this appealed (particularly in the area of worship and of music) but in other areas of church life such as outreach, pastoral care, social justice, ministry to children and families, and deepening involvement of the laity, this theological perspective was woefully inadequate.

Although not offered as an alternative account there was evidence of a praise-blame account

To blame everything on a vicar, who tended to dictate change in a 'take it or leave it manner' is a little unfair, when change was possibly automatically resisted without due consideration or attempts to compromise

The one reflection I would highlight concerns the value of the 30:30:30 diagnosis and the role it continues to play in the thinking (*wisdom*) of Parish C.

The Questionnaire and alternative accounts of what happened in parish D, E and F

(a) A story of parishes consciously questioning the future of their normal pattern as a result of the pressure to reduce clergy numbers and a specific suggestion that they could share clergy (with the emphasis on what we regard as *normal*)

The normal pattern for a parish is one church, one vicar and broadly speaking, one congregation. The suggestion that three parishes should move away from this normality by sharing two clergy between them radically questions this concept of normal parish life. A carefully designed consultation enabled the parishes concerned to consider the suggestion and name what they feared: one or perhaps two named Churchmanship as a distinctive feature which might be threatened by such an arrangement, while another felt its freedom was threatened by what appeared to amount to a take over. Freedom was retained by deciding to look for a different partnership. (An

arrangement you choose can become 'normal' much more quickly than an arrangement that is forced on you.)

(b) A story of the wisdom of the parishes clarifying what is being negotiated around the suggestion of sharing clergy (with the emphasis on *working with the wisdom of the congregations*)

The process itself makes clear that the future of these parishes is a matter for the congregations involved and not just something to be decided by the diocese or the deanery or the clergy. The *wisdom of the congregations* is being taken seriously. The process enables some important issues to emerge in addition to the ones specifically addressed. The negotiation is moved on, not abandoned or rejected.

(c) A story of how *flux and transition* affect the future of parishes (with an emphasis on seeing which *metaphors for organizations* best help us understand what has happened)

The metaphor of *flux and transition* invites us to see the existence of many parishes as the result of constantly changing factors. (Many parishes were not here two hundred years ago, and many may not be here in two hundred years time.) The pressure for change in this case comes from the known decline in the availability of clergy; there are almost certainly other pressures at work which we have not identified. By going out to meet the challenge (employing the metaphor of congregations as organizations with *brains*) by making suggestions and negotiating ways forward, some freedom of initiative is retained by the congregations involved within the flux of uncontrollable events. This is preferable to leaving other people (e.g. the diocese) to make the decision for us, or simply to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by inevitable change.

(d) Part of a story of parishes going out to meet *strategic* level challenges with implications for their own *organization* (using four levels within a congregation: *the individual, the interpersonal, the organizational, and the strategic*)

This is only one episode in a longer story (not yet at an end) of exploring an appropriate local *strategy* for responding to the decline in clergy numbers. It

involved an attempt to enable members of the congregations to address a suggested way forward which would have considerable implications for the way their lives together were *organized* in the future. What is unusual about this exploration is that it involved an open invitation to the members of the congregations in a context in which *strategy* is normally left to a few (e.g. the diocese) and *organization* is taken for granted, that is to say, rarely reflected on as something that could be changed or adapted.

The seven responses from parishes D, E and F (at least one from each parish) are illuminating.

Everyone agreed with the basic story, though the following qualifications were made

there was a difference in churchmanship which was seen as an obstacle
yes, although I am not sure it was as clear as you make out to the congregations prior to the day conference that we were definitely looking at 3 to 2 clergy reduction. As far as I remember it was more positioned as a general investigation with no pre-conceived agenda. I guess most would have been aware of the general pressure on numbers

and a rather different observation

it has captured all the nuances very well

| Summary | Preference | Rejection |
|--------------|------------|-----------|
| Normal (a) | 2+1 | 1 |
| Wisdom (b) | 1+1 | 0 |
| Metaphor (c) | +1 | 1 |
| Levels (d) | 1+1 | 1 |

Table 5.11 showing the preferred summaries for Parishes D, E and F

The +1 represents someone who said all were needed. This represents a wide spread of perceptions which the associated comments illuminate

too different to compare

(a) is closest [...] elements of (b) (c) and (d) were consequences

(d) would not have been in the congregations minds too much

would reject (c) - I'm not good with metaphors!

all four sound more deliberate than it felt at the time

One alternative account reads

Members of three congregations, all of which felt an insecurity about future patterns of ministry, met to seek to understand each other better and find possible ways ahead. In the event, the day seemed to underline difference and current sustainability rather than point to future change.

while another claims

The three Churches Together day was a result of frustration on my part that those charged with strategic decision making powers were set on this one solution and were stuck in thinking of other options. Therefore, such a day together was going to flush out whether the scheme had legs. It clearly showed me, for the first time, just how impossible the proposal was. It would never work. I had had an open mind prior to the day together. But my mind was completely turned round after the day. It became clear to me that we had to acknowledge that we were going to have to embrace a new scheme to share priests and finally let go of this one. This released the congregation and the PCC to be open to other possibilities. It had become clear that mutual respect was going to be essential - and this was absent from the relationship with the other two churches/congregations. In some of the exercises the gloves did come off and it was good that this could happen.

There is insufficient evidence to enable any classification of the contrasting accounts according to Sims scheme. The wide acceptance of most of the stories shows that no one is attempting to establish a single authoritative account. A few points in the two alternative accounts just quoted are worth highlighting:

- the shared sense of insecurity about future patterns of ministry
- the process as a means of 'releasing' congregations so that they might discover other possibilities
- the importance of mutual respect in negotiating any form of partnership.

A 'shared sense of insecurity' and a general anxiety about the future will almost always be an important factor within, and for, the *wisdom of the congregation*. The Parish Development training enables the assembling of stories with different memories and different interpretations each with a different status, none of which present themselves as 'solutions' for anything

in particular. By making a priority for understanding, rather than solving, wisdom begins with the humility of *not knowing* (Chia and Holt 2007; page 56 above). This is not the stance of wooly liberalism. It is the serious pedagogy of people who need to learn in a way that does not increase their dependency on others. The different stories thus assembled represent and encourage different possibilities for the congregation to *choose*. The method cannot dispel uncertainty and insecurity but it is structured around a shared destiny which the congregation, in faith, is free to fashion.

‘Releasing’ congregations to other possibilities is partly covered by the point just made, but it also involves drawing on the resources of the whole congregation and not just those who are counted as its ‘leaders.’ (This point will recur when considering the metaphor of the congregation as a Brain.)

The importance of mutual respect in negotiations of any kind is obvious to most observers, but not always to participants negotiating matters which carry emotional and symbolic significance over and above the rational aspect of whatever arguments are involved. The mediation of a shared pattern of working as well as the mediation of an impartial chairperson is a valuable contribution to the achievement of mutual respect.

Metaphors, levels and the diocesan perspective

Although it is clear that the accounts built around ‘metaphors’ and ‘levels’ failed to resonate with the congregations as represented in the returned questionnaires, a discussion of these perspectives on the congregation as an organization still has potentially important implications for the relationship between the congregation and the diocese, since, in an important sense, my involvement with the congregation was part of the diocesan support services for parishes. The perspectives which have dominated the parish data and its analysis so far in this chapter have basically treated the congregation as if it were an autonomous body or system. For many purposes this treatment can be justified, but for a more complete understanding parishes must also be seen as subsystems within the larger system of the diocese. This larger

perspective accords with Anglican Ecclesiology which regards the diocese as the basic unit of the church presided over by the Bishop; it also accords with many of the legal and financial structures of the Church of England where authority and final responsibility is vested in the Bishop and the diocese, rather than in the parish. This relationship between parish and diocese is far from simple and has many local and historical variations. For most purposes this relationship involves routine transactions, like the transfer of money, inspections, authorizations, and the like which are long established features of church life, as well as the occasional visit to a parish by a Bishop or an Archdeacon for some occasion of celebration, or, more rarely, of discipline. An increasingly important feature of this relationship concerns responsibility for the allocation of resources, in particular, the allocation of ordained clergy to parishes.

An examination of the data collected in the case studies from the admittedly more academic perspectives of metaphors and levels may be especially relevant to this important relationship between congregations and the diocese.

The metaphor of the **congregation as a machine**, as already remarked, is prima facie inappropriate for all congregations, but the metaphor encourages us to recognize machine like patterns within the organization. These include a high value placed on efficiency and bureaucracy, especially standard procedures, and also on viability, which is most readily evident in financial terms. Viability is of course not merely financial, but financial viability is unavoidably important. The notion of the 'bottom line' and the impression that inability to pay your way usually spells the end of an organization applies to churches too. When finances are in order and functioning efficiently, they do not occupy a great deal of attention, but when they go wrong they threaten almost everything else.

For parish A the metaphor is evident in the argument that two church buildings were not needed for the efficient functioning of the parish and that life would be simpler, easier and less expensive if one were closed, especially in the context of ongoing financial difficulties. One of the things

learned in the course of discussion is that parish churches in the Church of England can only be closed by the Queen: had the PCC in parish A chosen the option of closing a church, the responsibility for doing so would then be handed on to the diocese. They had the power to initiate the process, after which they would play no formal part. (Even this is an oversimplification.)

For parish B the metaphor is reflected in the concern for the efficient functioning of the parish in the vacancy between vicars, since the vicar normally takes responsibility for most things.

For parish C the metaphor influences the perception of 'what is happening' in terms of efficient functioning. The threatened decline into chaos and inefficiency, including insolvency, due to the loss of members and their unwillingness to fill vital roles within the organization would mean that everything would grind to a halt (machine like.)

For parishes D E and F one possible way of remaining effective with fewer ordained resources was seriously addressed.

None of the congregations are very likely to see themselves as a machine, but the administrative concerns of the diocese can easily give the impression that the diocese sees the parishes as more - or less - efficient machines. Most transactions with the diocese have to do with legalities like Faculty Legislation, the swearing in of office holders and Archidiaconal inspections; the standard procedures for the appointment of vicars; with the return of statistics, or with financial payments: all of which relate to the efficient (machine like) running of the organization. This is not to deny the pastoral and supportive quality which is often part of the relationship, but simply to point out the impression that the machine metaphor can dominate the relationship between parish and diocese.

The metaphor of the **congregation as an organism** draws attention to the similarity between an organization and a living organism, especially in the organisms ability to flourish only if its internal organs work in harmony and if its basic needs are met within the environment.

For parish A the metaphor is relevant in at least two ways: the prospect of closing one of the churches seemed like choosing to lose a vital part of themselves,

closure of either [church] would reduce the congregation and not save a deal of money

while the determination to keep both churches implied working hard in the environment to raise the necessary resources,

our willingness to work hard for our two churches will continue

is akin to an organisms determination to stay alive.

For parish B the prospect of dying never crossed anyone's mind, but the effort to cooperate in the organizing of the vacancy could be likened to the internal organs 'deciding' to work in harmony.

everyone was more aware of what others did, we pulled together.

For parish C the prospect of death or very serious injury did hang over the congregation until it was averted by diocesan action. Then the situation became akin to a recuperation seeking to rebuild health by adopting healthy organizational practices:

new leadership has enabled us to begin to move forward again, to broaden the base of our congregation and to make real progress.

For parishes D, E and F the contemplation of a changing environment, a contemplation urged on them and all parishes by the diocese, led to the serious consideration of one suggestion for adapting; while this particular suggestion was rejected, the need to adapt was accepted and led to an alternative scheme being adopted by one of the parishes.

For parish A we can discern a clash between the mechanistic and organic metaphors in the decision making process. The main thrust of the argument for closing a church belongs to the mechanistic metaphor, while the main argument for retaining the two is essentially organic.

For parishes D, E and F it could be argued that since in general no one knows in advance which organisms are going to get along together, and which will prove to be incompatible, the policy of deliberately involving a good proportion of the members of the congregations concerned in testing a suggestion of this kind will provide a valuable indicator of compatibility. Although the method focusses on apparently objective reasons it allows significant subjective factors to emerge

general apprehension about worship styles and churchmanship (quote from the public report)

two parishes with a more visionary outlook, one much more pragmatic

This is important since relationships are not simply rational arrangements, but inevitably involve emotional factors as well.

The metaphor of the **congregation as a culture** encourages us to focus on the accustomed patterns of behaviour and on the importance of symbols.

In parish A the two churches have a symbolic significance for two contrasting cultures which have been working hard to cooperate and accommodate each other. One church is 'historic' associated in the past with the landed gentry and is an ideal setting for traditional choral worship, for weddings and for funerals; the other was built specifically to accommodate a new population in a different part of the parish. It is a more versatile building, able to be adapted for different purposes and a good setting for modern worship with a music group rather than a traditional organ. The choice to close one of these buildings would have meant the symbolic triumph of just one culture and the end of the attempt or rather the achievement of holding the two cultures together. One assertion was regularly repeated

both churches are equally loved

which I interpret as also meaning both cultures are equally loved and accepted.

In parish B the culture and symbolism of the parish as an historic community that persisted and even thrived come what may, made it almost self evident that they would pull together and do what was necessary to get through this stage in their life.

[B] is a bounded place which works very well and has done for a thousand years

For parish C, used to a culture of success and competence,

our standard of music is outstanding

the support systems for elderly people seems to be very good

the crisis came as an unpleasant surprise. The way back was essentially a restoration of the culture of competence.

For parishes D E and F the culture included the important symbolism of independence and apparent self sufficiency. Through no fault of their own this symbol of their importance is under threat. The parish under the most immediate threat took the initiative and chose who to share with rather than have something they didn't like imposed on them, in line with their culture of independence. (Because the threat was more distant for the other two parishes that way of asserting their independence was not really open to them.)

The metaphor of the **congregation as a political system** is one that the nature of the processes involved in the interventions affects directly. This is not something I emphasize, but the effect of identifying the wisdom of congregations by inviting everyone to register their opinions anonymously bypasses the articulate people who take it on themselves to speak for others. In this way the possibility of a new politics emerges which is radically democratic. Now the articulate people may voice exactly what the anonymous process also reveals, but equally, they may not. If a confrontation occurs within this process it occurs in the first place quietly, giving space for the articulate to change what they say. This political learning can take place without public confrontation and the apparent humiliation of having to retract or climb down. This in itself is an important potential alteration to the political system of congregations.

In parish A there was some evidence of attempts to manipulate political processes (allegations were made of pressure being put on some people not to stand for election; and of instructions given to proceed with work before the formal decision had been taken by the PCC; these allegations were not

made in public and were not investigated), but the major part of the deliberations relating to the decision making were conducted in public and involved listening to the opinions of a significant proportion of the congregation.

In parish B the political metaphor might be described as 'dormant' inasmuch as the needs of most groups seemed to be met to their satisfaction, and were therefore not brought to any special attention. One observation is worth mentioning

The choir, which previously had seemed only interested in defending its own interests, became more involved in what else was going on.

In parish C the political power was expressed primarily by withdrawing, either from the congregation altogether, including giving financial support, or from the varied responsibilities that belong to its effective governance. This was on the grounds that legitimate needs and expectations were not being met:

when initiatives were proposed (as they regularly were) they were in effect blocked by the vicar and the congregation never found a way to unblock or work around that difficulty. The issue didn't surface clearly in the consultation meetings because people were not inclined to confront the then vicar.

Thus a crisis was precipitated by withdrawing rather than confronting, a policy which led eventually to outside intervention and a new start.

In parishes D E and F the joint enterprise of collecting evidence to be weighed in favour of or against closer cooperation and the sharing of clergy, undermined any preformed political aims by shifting the grounds of debate. Or did it merely enable adroit politicians to find another way of forwarding their preformed aims by embracing the terms that emerged during the consultation - 'churchmanship', and 'takeover'? There is rarely an unambiguous political account. The politics of the method aimed to democratize the decision making process by offering a genuine consultation with the people who would be most affected, and which would enable important emotional as well as rational factors to be taken into account.

The metaphor of the **congregation as a psychic prison** relates mainly to the mental prison which prevents members of organizations even thinking radical thoughts, and to the unconscious motivations that can be powerfully at work within an organization. Neither are particularly evident in the four case studies, though paradoxically saying this may simply be evidence of the powerful effect of psychic imprisonment! On the other hand to invite my involvement in the first place was to risk a new and unfamiliar approach.

In parish A the decision making process was itself an education for all concerned where each learned, albeit reluctantly, the strength of the other point of view, and together negotiated the decision that would build up rather than damage the congregation. Whatever unconscious motivations were at work, they did not seem in the end to distort the process unduly, from my perspective.

In parish B I sensed as a participant observer that one or two people did take it for granted that certain tasks could only be undertaken by a restricted number of people with the consequence that some tended to be overburdened and others less involved than they might have been.

X worked very hard ... didn't want Sunday's off ... wouldn't let go

An unconscious motivation for this might lie in the symbolic importance attached to people who hold a formal office.

In parish C one might argue that the congregation preferred evasion to assertiveness as an example of being caught in a psychic prison which made confrontation with the vicar unthinkable, because, as already quoted

people were not inclined to confront the then vicar.

In parishes D,E and F there is no discernible evidence of people being bound in a psychic prison in a way that is clearly detrimental to their well being.

The metaphor of the **congregation as an instrument of domination** focusses attention on the darker side of organizational life. My interventions

and research enquiries were not designed to uncover such aspects of parish life, but some evidence did nevertheless emerge.

This was mostly to do with the overloading of people: in parish A for example, there was a shared sense that everyone was working very hard (as well as getting older)

An aging congregation, being tired and overworked

and in parish B a sense of exhaustion following the vacancy

[the vacancy] was a good experience, very busy, Tired towards the end, relief that it is over but miss it.

In parishes D, E and F there was an awareness that there would be an inevitable increase in clergy workloads if they have to look after more than one parish

there is a realization that there will be a greater need for lay input and that any incumbents will have a wider ministry

But I also became aware of some allegations made about insensitive or bad behaviour; I appreciate the pain involved for those on the receiving end of allegations, but the immediate question is how to respond wisely to such things? The policy I pursued in these cases was to ignore as completely as possible anything that could not be repeated in public.

On the other hand it is important to recognize that for a few people the story that they have been misunderstood or deliberately misrepresented is a very significant factor relating to their own integrity. Individuals - including individuals in these case studies - may well want to say that they have been seriously, even deliberately, misunderstood and misrepresented without being able to persuade many others that this was the case, or, (and this is probably more significant), that this misunderstanding made a significant difference to what happened. Thus some participants in parish A have insisted that the major decision concerned the parishes finances and its ability to thrive, and was not about the closing of a church, except as a means to that end. They may well be right but such a distinction was lost on the majority. Thus the story of being misunderstood will remain a pious myth regardless of how true it may be; very important to those concerned but

largely irrelevant to the canonical accounts. The same mythical status may apply to the story which is the alleged misrepresentation, though if it was widely related and believed, it may function as apocryphal.

The metaphor of the **congregation caught up in and the product of processes of flux and transition** is a significantly different kind of metaphor from most of the others since it is more abstract, more conceptual (Morgan 2006 p288.). First, the metaphor resonates in several important ways with the wisdom of the congregation. Second, it relates especially to an organization which sees itself as its most important product, since this is a strong characteristic of most congregations. Third, it shifts the perspective from regarding change as a frequently unwelcome feature of life, to seeing change as the essence of life with apparently stable or fixed states as no more than a moment in this ongoing process of continuous change. This flow of change may bring threats, but it also brings new opportunities. Understanding the logic of change becomes an important skill for the management of change.

The metaphor of *autopoiesis* suggests a standpoint that ‘abolishes’ the distinction between the organization and its environment. It argues that organizations are self referential systems responding to their own perceptions of the environment: in this sense the world in which they find themselves is a part of the organization itself, a part of its self understanding and not a separate entity. When I attempt to apply this aspect of the metaphor to the case study parishes I suggest that

For parish A the world is unreasonable (the clues to this include attitudes to the diocese quoted above, and experience of radical economic and social change in the parish that have left them disadvantaged) which calls for the response of defiance, ‘standing up for ourselves.’

For parish B the world is reasonable enough and they work actively and patiently with it. (There is no evidence of serious complaint or special struggle.)

For parish C the world is capable of springing nasty surprises; things can go seriously wrong, (so serious that we can't solve it by ourselves.) Precipitating a crisis was a means of getting the problem solved and starting back on the road to recovery.

For parishes D, E and F the world is contracting (shrinking) and so we have to negotiate and reorganize our futures, but we want to play a part in this, not have it imposed on us. (The parishes recognize the challenge of fewer clergy.)

Insight from chaos theory about how self organizing emerges from chaos suggest the following:

For parish A a determination to self-organize was based not simply on raw defiance, but on a determination to hang onto the values and buildings that had enabled two congregations to become one.

For parish B the conscious choice to self-organize in a democratic and shared way proved to them that they could manage for a good while without a vicar of their own; it is not essential to have a vicar doing or controlling the organizing.

For parish C the self-organizing took the form of non-cooperation which accelerated the problems that were already present, thus ensuring a radical response.

For parishes D,E and F the self organizing emerged through the opportunity provided by the Consultation to engage with the issues and to do more than simply accept or reject a single suggested way forward.

Another aspect of this metaphor of flux is about identifying the inherent tensions and oppositions that are always present in any complex situation. This highlights what Morgan calls the management of paradox.

For parish A analysis has already shown that there exists a deep tension between the desire/need for financial realism and the desire/need to preserve the hard won unity between the contrasting elements of the congregation symbolized by the two church buildings. The paradox to be managed here is between the pastoral recognition of congregational unity, and the effective financial management of the parish. In a parallel way the diocese has to balance the pastoral care for struggling parishes with the need to remain financially viable.

For parish B the paradox which their successful management of the vacancy reveals concerns the role of a vicar in the congregation: if a congregation can manage without a vicar for nearly a year and a half, does it really need one of its own at all? (This question was not raised explicitly, but it is nevertheless a question arising from the experience.) The implicit paradox here concerns the role of vicars: are they 'in charge' and does their presence/presidency authorize and legitimate all that happens, or are they only essential for certain things so that they could be called in when needed?

For parish C the tension was most evident in the breakdown of the normal system of shared governance embodied in "Vicar, Churchwardens and Parochial Church Council" due to non participation by a significant number in response to the way in which this governance was - or was not - happening under the chairmanship of the vicar. The tension was between the wisdom of the vicar and the wisdom of the congregation who had quite different ideas about how decisions should be made and carried through in church communities. The paradox was not managed initially, and order or stability was only restored when eventually it was beginning to be managed successfully.

For parishes D,E and F the tensions revolved around the identity of a congregation in its relationship with other congregations. If each does not have a vicar of their own, since vicars contribute considerably to this identity as both symbols and spokespersons or advocates, would their identities merge? Does cooperation mean losing more than 'our own vicar'? Would it

amount to being taken over? Would our distinctiveness (churchmanship) be compromised? And most crucially, do we have a choice in this?

In conclusion I offer these observations on the four case studies which this metaphor of flux and transition has raised for me:

Parish A have chosen a demanding and costly way forward in order to preserve both the unity of the congregation and the two church buildings. Whether this choice will prove successful only time and hard work will tell. If it were to fail and one building had to be closed, this would not now necessarily be at the expense of the unity of the congregation. To have done one's best and to have failed, is quite different from not having tried at all. Even a shared failure can be unifying. The process of deciding - tedious for some and painful for others - was an important factor in providing the motivation needed to make the preference a reality. The work is now being carried out by the congregation members themselves without the help or hindrance of a vicar. The wisdom of the congregation has prevailed and the congregation has learned that it prefers to keep its future, so far as that is possible, in its own hands.

In parish B the process of planning for the vacancy as a congregation (and not leaving it to the PCC for example) enabled the vacancy to be a shared success and has left a small legacy of responsibilities and tasks being carried out by more members i.e. not done by the vicar, than was the case before. A kind of social capital has been built up among the congregation. Whether or not this proves to be the kind of 'nudge' which leads eventually to a major change, remains to be seen.

For parish C the wisdom of the congregation took the apparently perverse form of bringing an unsatisfactory situation to a crisis point which necessitated/enabled an intervention resulting in a new start. Now, the straightforward wisdom of the congregation is playing a significant role in how things are decided in the future.

For parishes D, E and F comparing the wisdoms of the three congregations enabled some issues to emerge (contrasting outlooks and churchmanship) while at the same time providing at least the start of a forum in which the congregations could feel they were contributing directly to the outcome. This engendered a sense of responsibility for making choices work, which the simple agreement to a proposal made by others would not have done. The congregations began to learn to negotiate and take responsibility for their own futures.

The metaphor of the **congregation as a brain** promises to throw most light on how congregations learn. I follow Morgan's headings as outlined above.

Creating Learning Organizations

The question to be addressed here is what evidence do the case studies provide for believing that guidelines for a learning organization are being followed?

Scanning and anticipating environmental change is the *raison d'être* of the intervention in parishes D, E and F, which seeks to anticipate the decline in clergy numbers.

Challenging operating norms and assumptions also applies to D, E and F, challenging the assumption that each parish needs its own vicar (or at least a vicar that is exclusively its own). In a different way the decision making process in parish A at least challenged the assumption that the two churches were indispensable, even though it came to the conclusion that the assumption was justified. A mild challenge to the assumption that only properly authorized people should undertake many tasks within the church was evident in parish B.

Encourage 'emergent' organization is not at first sight an obvious feature of the case studies unless we count the sharing of clergy between parishes as an emergent pattern of organization. Another candidate would be the organizational pattern that obtained in Parish B during the vacancy which was planned and executed by the congregation itself. (The main area within the Church of England where this is consciously happening is around the

Fresh Expressions movement which did not feature to my knowledge in any of these parishes.)

Look for designs that facilitate learning is evident in the very interventions themselves. By inviting my involvement the parishes were opening themselves to a new learning process. The planned process for decision making employed by parishes A and B, and the matching exercise for parishes D, E and F, are essentially learning and negotiating processes which also enabled other factors beside those explicitly addressed to emerge.

Organizations as Holographic Brains

Again, following Morgan, I ask whether there is evidence that his five important principles are being followed:

1 Build the whole into the parts

The distinctive feature of the learning Parish Development enables is that everyone learns and discovers together, and from one another. It is not the kind of learning that is transferred from someone who knows to people who do not know. In that sense the whole is in the parts, at least potentially. What this means for congregations is not that everyone can do everything (an oversimplified version of one example Morgan gives) but that most people appreciate and understand what most of the others do. This appreciation of what others do was especially evident in parish B, as quotes above indicate. But a shared appreciation of what the congregation as a whole needs to do if it is to make a 'size transition' or balance potentially rival purposes is also an important example of the 'whole in the parts.'

2 The importance of redundancy

Most congregations today - including all in the case studies - tend to see themselves as hard pressed and under resourced. They certainly do not feel they have the kind of spare capacity which the principle of redundancy implies is desirable for a brain-like, holographic-like, organization. On the other hand this self understanding may be an operating norm and assumption which needs to be challenged. The wisdom of the congregation as a whole, in contrast to the wisdom of the leadership, includes potentially the spare capacity the organization needs in order to learn and function effectively.

3 Requisite variety

Again, the resource for this lies in the congregation and its wisdom. The implicit question in parishes A and B was not simply what should happen? but what are you prepared to do to enable what you think should happen? The principle of thinking and discussing together means that everyone learns things they would not have thought of by themselves. (The list of suggestions and observations compiled by parish C at its 'Open Space Consultation' runs to 14 A4 pages, though it does include quite a lot of duplication.)

4 Minimum specs

The clearest examples of this principle are to be found in parishes B and C when participants were invited to compile lists of things they would like to see done (with no prior restrictions implied.) These lists were then prioritized and most were made into tasks to be completed. Although the answers given were not especially innovative, asking the question was. My guess is that as people learn that such questions are serious and the answers are acted on, they would engage with the process with even more imagination and commitment.

5 Learning to learn

This principle has been covered in the previous section 'Creating Learning Organizations.'

(As is already evident in the 'metaphor' accounts provided for the Questionnaires I selected only what I judged as the most relevant metaphors for each case study to present to the congregations.)

Analyzing the data with the several lenses of Morgan's metaphors has suggested several important piecemeal insights (which are timely, local and particular, as becomes wisdom) rather than one or two major general lessons.

The 'levels' perspective

The 'levels' perspective of Kessler and Bailey (2007) did resonate with someone in parish B but apparently not for many others. It does involve, as the person from parish A observed, a more academic language which congregational members do not readily respond to. But from the diocesan

point of view the level of strategy will always have an urgency, which from the point of view of parishes is easily overlooked. A process of involving congregations in strategic decisions (which is what happened in case study four with parishes D, E and F) is a process of education as well as decision making and management. (The proposal which is to be found at the end of chapter six designed to demonstrate the *implementable validity* of the thesis, is a proposal that implicitly addresses all four levels.)

Chapter 6

Implications

In this final chapter I first summarize the evidence which validates the thesis and then discuss its implications for practical theology and research, for the professional body of the church and for an appropriate pedagogy for ‘building up the body of Christ.’ The chapter concludes with a proposal which demonstrates the implementable validity of *working with the wisdom of the congregation*.

My thesis claims that Parish Development training, characterized by *working with the wisdom of the congregation*, is an enhanced training tool which is a new, versatile and valuable resource for training and development in the Church of England (and potentially for other churches too.)

Working with the wisdom of the congregation is new

The newness or originality of *working with the wisdom of the congregation* has several important features. One is the focus on the congregation as a whole rather than on individuals within the congregation. This is an example of 'double loop' learning within the traditions of training at diocesan level within the Church of England. Another concerns the original use of many insights taken from Congregational Studies and re-presented as exercises for the congregation to use in identifying the shared wisdom which is embedded in their practices and in their opinions. A third is the emphasis on understanding how this congregational practice is *organized*.

Working with the wisdom of the congregation is versatile

The versatility of this training method is demonstrated by the variety of situations in which it was employed in the four case studies. Apart perhaps from the fourth case study the exact nature of what was needed was not known in advance, nor was there a precisely defined goal to work to. The nature of *working with the wisdom of the congregation* means that whatever is needed is defined or redefined within the process itself, and the process can be adapted to try to meet that need.

This is especially clear in the first two case studies. Although the question of the two church buildings for Parish A was certainly not invisible at the start of the training process the precise nature of what was at stake for the congregation only became clear as the training process developed. It proved able to accompany and moderate the decision making in a way that enabled the members of the congregation who would have been in favour of closing a church (which included the vicar) to be defeated as far as the decision was concerned, and probably wounded in the process, but not routed or destroyed by the conflict that inevitably accompanied such an emotive choice.

In parish B the possibility of a vacancy was not on the agenda at the beginning of the process. (Vacancies can and do occur for all parishes, but their timing is not usually known long in advance.) Satisfaction with the first

Parish Development experience led to the request for help in planning for the vacancy when a different way of *organizing* everyday parish life had to be planned. Working with the congregation (rather than with the Churchwardens and authorized lay ministers as usually happens) enabled the congregation to

[sail] along in the vacancy - everybody pulled together, it drew people together it was more of a challenge than a burden.

The final Parish Development training was presented under the title 'Training the new vicar' and contributed to their induction into the parish.

For parish C the training involvement was rather more tangential to what happened. Although Parish Development training and its associated diagnosis might conceivably have helped in the deteriorating situation (they thought it worth asking for a second consultation) it proved unable to help in a decisive way. Nevertheless it did not obviously add to the problems, and the 30:30:30 diagnosis has been valued in the rebuilding process.

Parishes D, E and F did however have a clear task from the outset which was to explore the possibilities and implications of a suggestion that had been around for some years (though not known to everyone in the parishes) that they might work more closely, even sharing clergy in the future. The Parish Development training gave the discussion a framework whereby each parish produced a comparable account of themselves which then provided a basis for assessing the advantages and drawbacks of the suggestion. Without such material the discussion would have been much more difficult to manage. The process engaged everyone who came, and allowed other issues to emerge. The outcome was not an endorsement of the suggestion but a determination on the part of one of the parishes to negotiate a more acceptable alternative. The overall aim of finding a way to staff parishes with less clergy was achieved through *working with the wisdom of the congregations*.

The case studies have shown that this enhanced training tool is versatile enough to resource congregations through normal changes like vacancies or the induction of a new vicar, and also to

resource congregations making difficult decisions, either about their own situation, or when it comes to negotiating sharing clergy with another parish or parishes.

Even when Parish Development training is not able to made a decisive improvement in a situation, there is no evidence that it makes matters worse, and can lay some foundations for rebuilding.

Working with the wisdom of the congregation is a valuable training tool

This versatility shows that this enhanced training tool can be a valuable resource for the support of parishes by the diocese. It straddles the boundary between training and development by encouraging congregations to understand themselves and their shared wisdom in order to take responsibility for negotiating their own development. (The building up of the body of Christ; the *oikodome* of the *koinonia*.)

But it isn't perfect

But even when *working with the wisdom of the congregation* is shown to be versatile and valuable there are still weaknesses to be acknowledged and challenges to be faced. These I discuss under the general heading of implications which I divide into three sections

1. Implications for practical theology and research
2. Implications for the professional body of the church
3. Implications for an appropriate pedagogy for 'building up the body of Christ.'

Implications for practical theology and research

Working with the wisdom of the congregation is a relatively new approach in theology. While Patrick Keifert (2009) argues that to give the congregation a central role in theology and practice is to return to an early stage in Christian

history, he also points out that it is impossible to return as if nothing had happened in the meantime. The 'return' is from a more recent situation in which the congregation was regarded as dependent on the wisdom of clergy: as an army of subordinates, as a flock to be shepherded, as an audience to be enlightened, a workforce to be directed or as a class to be taught. All these characterizations are to some extent unfair, but there is sufficient truth in them to point up the change that this new approach entails. It involves what Morgan calls the management of paradox, finding in practice a balance between the wisdom of the congregation and the wisdom of the professional body of the church. It is not a matter of rejecting one and embracing the other. It will not be a balance that can be captured in words, but will be something that is found within the dynamic processes of being the church, which means in the practice of building up the body of Christ. The experience of Parish Development has taught me that congregations are very willing to engage with questions that concern who they are and what is needed for their development. I think the experience of Action Research in general as reported, for example, by Danny Burns (2007) has also underlined the willingness of most workers or participants in any significant undertaking to engage seriously with the business of improving what they do. This willingness can still be thwarted by systems that have developed sophisticated 'defensive mind sets' (Argyris 2004). Ongoing action research with congregations may eventually find ways around these defensive mind sets and lead to a more wholesome balance.

Implications for the professional body of the church

Nearly all my Parish Development work has been initiated by an invitation from parish clergy, endorsed by the PCC, to engage with their congregation in this form of training. Often this has been as a result of a recommendation from other clergy, which is always gratifying. While senior clergy have known that such training was happening, and have given genuine verbal support, *working with the wisdom of the congregation* has not yet become anything like a standard or regular feature of how a diocese supports parishes. Although I have had opportunities to share the advantages of this approach to training and management with groups of senior clergy including, for

example, archdeacons and area deans about 'matching' clergy and parishes (*Workbook* pages 73 - 77) it has not resulted in an obvious change of practice. While the immediate response was 'this would be a very good idea' I have the impression that when the occasion arises the normal procedures are so firmly embedded in the system that this suggestion is either forgotten, or the sheer busyness of most of the people involved means that they do not feel they have the time to include anything extra.

In that sense my task is to go on pestering, and to recruit allies as fellow advocates. It also involves training other trainers so that when openings do occur, there are sufficient people equipped and available to respond. My proposal below, which sets out an example of the *implementable validity* of the method will be an important contribution toward making a significant breakthrough.

Implications for an appropriate pedagogy for 'building up the body of Christ.'

No one person writing in English, to my knowledge, has engaged with the issues relating to the development of churches with the thoroughness that Christian Mueller has done in his two volume work in German (Moeller 1991, 1992). The English tradition probably does not look for such comprehensive treatments or systematic approaches in the way that German practical theology still appears to do.²³ Instead writers in English tend to value a comprehensiveness that follows from the collaboration of different workers in the field, and from books which collect contrasting and complementary evidence provided by a group of authors rather than by one. Either way, the inclination is to attend to the written word.

It is important to acknowledge the possibility that the kind of wisdom and the kind of praxis which build up the Christian community is to be found in an

²³ *Kirchentheorie* by Reiner Pruel (1997) would be another example

oral, rather than a written tradition. The contrast between oral and written in today's world of multi media communication is far from simple, but the oral is able to embrace the living, dynamic, flexible and negotiated character of wisdom and praxis in a way that written accounts find much more difficult. Knowledge can usually be written down; wisdom, skills, and values are much more elusive when it comes to putting them into words, but recognizable enough when we encounter them in practice, which often means in encounters that are oral, face to face and impermanent rather than written down and 'fixed' within a text.

A pedagogy for building up Christian churches will be one that begins with the unique character and situation of each congregation which is embedded in their shared wisdom. Parish Development enables and encourages congregations to discover this wisdom for themselves. Then in dialogue with one another, with scripture, with the wider world and in worship and prayer they take on the responsibility for becoming wiser still.

A proposal illustrating the 'implementable validity' of *working with the wisdom of the congregation*

Chris Argyris (2004) suggests that research into organizations should not only possess integrity in its reporting of evidence, and coherence or rigour in its arguments, it ought also to possess 'implementable validity' which I take to mean that it should offer the prospect of making an important and valuable difference to the organization concerned. In that spirit I conclude with this proposal for *organizing the learning* that will be a significant factor in making the difficult decisions posed by the serious decline in the number of clergy in the Church of England.

Facing the challenge posed by the declining number of stipendiary clergy by *working with the wisdom of the congregations*: a proposal in outline

Discussions about the allocation of clergy to parishes are usually based on the unit of a deanery, that is to say between typically ten to fifteen adjacent parishes (a manageable number) rather than at the diocesan level (typically about 200 parishes.)

The legal and pastoral responsibility for what is eventually decided remains with the Bishop, but the negotiations and the learning that leads to that decision is carried out by as many members of the congregations as are willing to be involved, with the Bishop, or more realistically a small team of people working with them on behalf of the Bishop. This is organized as a series of meetings, with the gaps between meetings being important opportunities for ideas and suggestions to be thought through. In order to accommodate the numbers a school is probably the best venue as somewhere that is likely to be large enough and be a neutral place in which to meet.

The first meeting involves what in my *Workbook* I have called a fast route through the parish development exercises, run in parallel for all the parishes involved (much as the morning session in the case study of D, E and F). The results of this exercise can be displayed at the end of the meeting, and also written up to be shared and mulled over before the second meeting. This would mean that everyone had an account of significant features of all the other parishes, produced by the members themselves, in a similar format, enabling comparisons to be made. This means that people can work with reliable and up to date accounts, and not just with impressions.

At the second meeting a number of matching exercises can take place on a purely exploratory basis;

- similar sized congregations could meet together on the basis that different size congregations require appropriate patterns of organization and have different expectations of clergy involvement: their task would be to spell out these expectations

- parishes with the same balance of purposes (50+, 40:40 or 30:30:30) could confer about how they are organized, and what tensions they experience
- those sharing a similar outlook might come together to compare notes about how they work

and so on, with the Bishops team members chairing and recording the discussions. These in turn would be written up and shared.

At a third meeting using Open Space Technology participants might explore issues and suggestions that have occurred to them so far. These discussions would be written up and shared.

The fourth meeting would begin the process spelled out in my *Workbook* as 'Learning a process for making good decisions.' This works with groups containing as far as possible proportionate representation from each of the parishes concerned. By this stage in the process a number of decisions may already have been made in principle, for example, about parishes that everyone agrees are likely to stay as they are because of their large size. In this way the groups may already be able to concentrate on sets of parishes that are thought to be possible candidates for sharing. If the decision making process makes room for the matching exercises to be found in the *Workbook* then further evidence will be collected about the implications of any decisions. Again, the Bishop's team facilitate. This is likely to require several meetings, since the process has nine steps.

The end product will be a set of negotiated proposals to make to the Bishop about how the challenge can be met in this particular deanery, or, if agreement has proved impossible, an agreed recognition that the Bishop will have to make the final decision. The proposals will have come from the people who will be most affected by the new arrangements, and they will have learned a good deal about each other through the process. The Bishops team will also have learned a great deal from their role as facilitators, and be well placed to advise the Bishop in cases where the parishes themselves have not been able to reach agreement.

The learning, deciding and negotiating necessary for success happen side by side between the people themselves. By contrast, a panel of wise men and women, however able and well meaning, have to learn and decide *on behalf of others*, and then have to discover whether their proposals will be accepted.

The Bishops team of facilitators for this process should include at least one person of obvious seniority in the diocese, as a sign that this is being taken seriously, and others normally drawn from outside the deanery concerned. They would need clear briefing about their role, which could be contained for all to see in the course booklet which would be available to all participants, and be much like my *Workbook*.

The process is workable, and although it will take a while to complete, the time invested will be commensurate with the importance of the task. In terms of the metaphor of the Brain the process employs the spare thinking capacity of the congregations. In terms of the political metaphor the openness of the process minimizes the kind of politics people resent (for example, secret deals). The discussion need not be dominated by machine like categories of efficiency, or restricted to the psychic prison of merely defending ones own patch. (I have been impressed by the generosity of thinking when people have been invited to list the things they want to avoid in decision making, the noxiants that Morgan and Lovell speak about.)

I have outlined this proposal in terms that make sense in the context of this thesis, but it would need to be adapted in order to be a realistic proposal that a deanery or diocese might take seriously. The whole process would have a specially designed Workbook to accompany the process (just as parish A had for the decision making and parishes D, E and F for their consultation.)

Appendix One

An Abstract of the Assignments in Part I of the Professional Doctorate Portfolio

My Portfolio consists of four assignments:

A Literature Review entitled 'Can Congregations learn to learn, and so become better at communicating Christian faith?' is a survey of the literature in English and German of books and articles which deal with the overlapping themes of practical theology, congregational studies, education and learning (especially Organizational Learning). It concludes by identifying four key voices: James Hopewell, Penny Becker, Nancy Dixon and Wilfried Engemann. (In retrospect I would now replace Engemann with Gareth Morgan.)

A Publishable Article entitled 'Organizing the purpose(s) of the Church' relates the fourfold typology I have developed in my professional work for discerning the purposes of a local church to Faith and Order documents on the purpose of the church. (It has not been published.)

A Research Proposal sets out how I planned to research the question which is the title of my Literature Review. One key feature of the proposal which has persisted has been the iterative nature of the research spiral - moving round 1 defining the topic 2 thinking about methods 3 reading for research 4 collecting data 5 analyzing data 6 writing up and back to 1 again. And so on.

Reflective Practice entitled 'Learning to learn.' My own experience of Reflective Practice focusses on three themes: the doctrine of providence, the experience of publishing, and reflections on a 'critical case' in my own practice, concluding with reflections on Journalling itself (something I was not used to.)

Appendix Two

A Theological Commentary on Parish Development (PD)

Introduction

PD is a method of learning and deciding about the local church which has an important relationship with theology. In this Appendix I offer a commentary on PD which concentrates on this relationship, and seeks to elaborate the significance of the concepts of wisdom, *oikodome* and *koinonia* by locating them within contemporary Anglican ecclesiology, with special reference to the practical proposal made on page 155ff.

The Anglican understanding of the Church is conveniently defined by the Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888 which sets out what Rowell calls 'characteristic Anglican emphases'. They are

The scriptures

The ecumenical creeds

The sacraments of baptism and the eucharist

The historic episcopate

(Rowell, 1999).

Ecclesiology in the Church of England seeks a comprehensiveness which 'baffles neatness and logic' (Ramsey cited by Avis, 2000, p.31). It tries to be true to several contrasting authorities:

to scripture,

to a variety of historic church traditions

to reason - in the sense of both learned scholarship (Avis 2000) and reasoned argument,

and, at the same time, to fit itself appropriately into the local situations and national characteristics of England. Because these situations and

characteristics are constantly changing, this is an ongoing task which requires wisdom (Hardy, 2001; Shanks, 2010) rather than the application of any 'blueprint ecclesiology' (Percy, 2010).

PD provides a resource for engaging in this task at the local level. It seeks to build on the wisdom of the congregation as revealed in its assumptions and practices. It presents a new perspective by focussing on the organizational character of its wisdom which implicitly poses the question "Can we become wiser?" In this way development, growth, building up, *oikodome*, (all forms of learning) are integral parts of wisdom.

PD does not of itself recommend a particular interpretation of scripture, tradition or reason. What it does, by enabling congregations to take part in these deliberations through the way it organizes them, is to strengthen the *koinonia* by equipping the congregation to take some responsibility for who they are and how they change. It does this, not by urging them to be responsible (an imperative), but by showing them that they can be responsible (a subjunctive)²⁴. Avis recognizes and values the tensions that are intrinsic to this approach. If these three can be 'bound together' (a phrase Avis owes to Ramsey) then it will be through people rather than principles that this happens (Avis, 2000, chap. 5).²⁵

This commentary is presented in three parts

1 PD themes in contemporary Anglican ecclesiology

2 PD and the future of the parish system

3 PD and the implementation of the proposal

A concluding section summarizes the main observations.

²⁴ 'The subjunctive mood...[is the one] in which possibilities are imagined and decisions are made...It is above all the mood (though rarely the literal verbal mood) of the parables of Jesus' (Ford 2007, p48).

²⁵ My own discussion of PD negotiating with scripture, tradition and reason can be found on p121-132 of Impey, 2010.

1. PD and contemporary Anglican Ecclesiology

Recent contributions to an Anglican understanding of the Church give a strong indication of ecclesiology as very much a 'work in progress';

The Quest for Anglican Ecclesiology (Avis, 2000, chap. 2),
Finding the Church (Hardy, 2001),
Transforming Church (Greenwood, 2002),
Anglicanism Reimagined (Shanks, 2010), and
Seeking the Church (Pickard, 2012).

The prominence of wisdom

The wisdom which plays a key role in PD resonates strongly with an emphasis on the patient seeking of wisdom stressed by contemporary Anglican theologians.

Daniel Hardy's collection of essays²⁶ (2001) were written around issues arising from the Lambeth Conference in 1998, and the Primates meeting in 2001, and point to the wisdom he believes was required at that critical juncture. He identifies one of the most fundamental dilemmas of today's Christianity:

'Is a detached, take-it-if-it-impresses-you approach to be normal? Or is an embeddedness in a spiritual reading of Scripture which accords it a formative effect on the minds and lives of Christians to be preferred?' (Hardy 2001 p234).

He sees one as extensive while the other is intensive, but both need each other if the Church is to serve its purpose in a healthy way. The two are held together by wisdom but

'our [current] wisdom is insufficient to move the Church fully in its mission in the world...the learning of wisdom is therefore essential for the revitalization of the mission of the Anglican Communion' (Hardy, 2001, p.177).

²⁶ Greenwood (2009), Percy (2010) and Pickard (2012) each acknowledge their indebtedness to Hardy.

This wisdom is not confined to the learned: 'the polities needed must ensure the deeper participation by all people in the spirit of Christ in their situation' (Hardy, 2001, p.167).

Andrew Shanks links wisdom to learning. He describes two 'Safe Zones'; one protecting religious people from difficult and disturbing questions, the other protecting in the same fashion anti-religious people. We need to occupy the 'broken middle' for 'true wisdom of faith...[is] all about learning how to negotiate the 'broken middle' (Shanks, 2010, p.37). To balance the affirmation of equality in baptism we need rituals which affirm each individuals lifelong pursuit of their individual vocation

'in other words of their quest for wisdom. Not conformity to any conventions of 'law' but to wisdom, the sort of wisdom that belongs to the fulfillment of faith, wisdom as an opening to 'grace'. Such wisdom has nothing to do with cleverness. Nor...book learning. Rather, it surely has everything to do with the way one takes to heart the sheer sobering fact of one's mortality....I'm talking about how the Church is most effectively to celebrate wisdom, as the proper goal of faith' (Shanks, 2010, p.78-9).

Martyn Percy offers a different perspective on wisdom by exploring the promise of implicit theology embedded in the practices of the church:

'in pointing out the connection of opposites, [solid yet flexible, strong yet yielding, open yet composed, inclusive yet identifiable] I am suggesting that Anglicans have an innate capacity for un-decidability and elasticity, in the very midst of concreteness.'

He goes on to quote Brian McLaren:

'...you learn to hold two or more things together when necessary...it is never sola [scripture] - never the only factor. Rather, scripture is in dialogue with the tradition, reason and experience...None of them sola can be the ultimate source of authority...Anglicans seek to live with the tension and the tolerance, believing that better outcomes will follow if they live with the tension...' (Percy, 2010, p.9).

In the chapter *Herding cats? Leading the Church (of England) in a New Age* he writes about the gap between 'blueprint ecclesiologies' and the 'concrete church' where simple ways of reform fail because no attempt has been made to understand the local or regional *terroir*. The result is a potentially deeper spiral of despair. Two sentences in this chapter could be viewed as an endorsement of PD which claims to make every effort to understand the *terroir* by working with the wisdom of the congregation:

'...even when clergy think they are being strategic in leadership, no assumptions can be made about the tactics and pragmatism of the laity..(Percy, 2010, p.122)...it will sometimes be necessary to prioritize conversation and quest over precision and absolute resolutions' (Percy, 2010, p.124).

Another chapter takes up the wisdom theme explicitly - *Sacred Sagacity: The Dynamics of Formation*. The focus here is on ordination training and the time it takes to accrue wisdom.

Such wisdom involves holding things which are naturally in tension with one another in balance or constructive equilibrium: Hardy's intensive and extensive; Greenwood's balancing Christological with pneumatological; Shank's negotiation of the 'broken middle'; Percy's 'connection of opposites'. This wisdom is not identified with any specific content that holds good in every situation, but with a sensitivity to the complexity of relationships involved in building up the church in its mission. PD enables a shared understanding of this complexity within the local church and points to the 'balancing' that this requires if positive development is to be achieved (compare pp.58-64 above).

Koinonia

Robin Greenwood takes up another of Hardy's themes, the communion (*koinonia*) of the Godhead within the Trinity:

'as God's triune life invites all creation into mutual play, the practice of church and theology has always to be reconstructed within the particularities of neighbourhood, society and world.' (Greenwood, 2009, p.xv).

His main emphasis is on the church as '*koinonia* (communion, community, communication)' which he identifies as Paul's definition of church, and which characterizes the mystery of the Holy Trinity:

'Most contemporary enactments of church and ministry...demonstrate the limiting consequences of developing an ecclesiology predominantly on a Christological basis...lack of concern for the work of the Spirit (pneumatology) leads to a rigid, oversolid and controlling ecclesiology' (Greenwood, 2009, p.11).

He devotes a whole chapter to the Church as 'the communal practice of Good News', including a discussion entitled *Church: school for learning the wisdom of God*. In this he identifies Unity, Holiness and Catholicity as marks of *koinonia*. The concluding thrust of his argument is that the role of ordained ministry is to oversee - not control - the ministry of the local church.

Stephen Pickard (2012) sees the need for a renewed sociality which is a dynamic ecclesiology for pilgrim people. This renewed sociality is not just Church focussed but asks how the Church might participate in the renewal of the wider social ordering of things in the world. This involves a re-examination of *koinonia* as sociality, our primary oneness, captured also by the African word 'Ubuntu'. *Koinonia* has become

'probably the most important way to speak of the Church of Jesus Christ. It is closely related to the 'body of Christ' image and has given rise to communion ecclesiology' (Pickard, 2012, p.36).

A 'renewed sociality' will be a gift to the world as well as the church. In terms of the four marks of the church mentioned in the Creeds it will be

One in expanding connectivity
Holy in transformed community
Catholic in embrace
Apostolic in shared discipleship.

Heresy, anxiety and politics

Pickard develops one theme that does not feature in PD: heresy. In his book *Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry* (2009), a collection of previously published essays, he attempts to find theological reasons for a

popular 'answer' to the challenges of ministry, namely 'Collaborate!' ²⁷ His second book (2012) is constructed around the notion of pilgrimage. He revises the contrast between Christological and pneumatological ecclesiologies in terms of 'natural ecclesial heresies'. There are two modes of heresy - doctrinal and ecclesial. An ecclesial heresy is one that is embedded in the fundamental frameworks that influence the practices of the church. Two he specially identifies are

- 1 sacred inflation (the 'top down' approach, related to Monism, a docetic Christology, and Manichaeism, thus endangering the humanity of the church)
- 2 a desacralized ecclesia (the 'bottom up' approach, related to a Pelagian culture and to theology overshadowed by social science leading to a disappearing church.)

A desacralized ecclesia is a toxic environment for an anxious church, (Pickard seems to assume that this is the situation for most of us), but the way forward is not so much a direct correction of the ecclesial heresy as a 'renewed sociality' or a better grasp of *koinonia* as implied in the previous paragraph.

Turning to examine church polities, which he believes should be 'structured for freedom,' he writes

'The patterns of authority within ecclesial polities are not in fact set in place irrevocably ...but from within their own life they contain the seeds of new order and differentiated forms. Unfortunately, such possibilities often remain hidden to ecclesial consciousness and to this extent it is difficult for human agents to participate in the renewing work of the Spirit' (Pickard, 2012, p.163).

Reflecting on how to uncover these hidden possibilities Pickard observes that

'In the church the domain of the informal is a vital ingredient given the voluntary nature of this society. The informal is the region of shared cultures; of the everyday and 'ordinary' way in which beliefs, values and customs circulate through common practices...full of meaning and

²⁷ My review of this book is published in *Practical Theology* Volume 4.1 2011pp.127 -129.

emotion...we ignore the importance of the informal at our peril (Pickard, 2012, p.171).

My research shows that PD can be a resource that gives access to this vital ingredient of the informal (first cousin of the wisdom of the congregation and of its *terroir* (Percy)), and does uncover the possibilities he believes so often remain hidden. Parish A chose a course of action many observers found surprising; Parish B, and its vicars, learned to recognize and respect 'the domain of the informal'; the new vicar in Parish C found the revealing of their 30:30:30 balance of purposes 'incredibly helpful,' while Parishes D, E and F found a new and better way forward.

2. PD and the Future of the Parish System

A collection of essays edited by Steven Croft *The Future of the Parish System* (2006) provides a discussion of ecclesiology which concentrates on the general challenge facing the parish system as the dominant (but not the only) structural feature of the Church of England. This theme relates very clearly to the proposal in Chapter Six. A major theme of the book concerns the place of Fresh Expressions within the mixed economy of the Church.

Theological Resources

Rowan Williams, Graham Cray and Steven Croft contribute to a section entitled 'Theological Resources'. Williams locates these in the New Testament and History (scripture and tradition):

'Each Christian generation makes itself responsible, as did Jesus' first friends, for bringing people into relation with him and so with each other. When that happens, the Church 'happens' - and it is always helpful to think of the Church as an event before it is an institution... the organizational side of the Church's life as we know it will always be secondary to and in service of the event.' (Williams, 2006, p.52).

Two aspects of our history are important in this context: the ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, and the parish system. Both need re-forming, which includes being open to other ways in which the Church 'happens'.

Cray writes about focusing church life on a theology of mission: 'The theological task requires us to put the values of a missionary Church ahead of models of the church, whether inherited or emerging' (Cray, 2006, p.63).

These values include

- being focused on the Trinity
- being incarnational and transformational
- making disciples
- and being relational, being a community.

Cray quotes from the report Mission-shaped Church: 'No serious attempt at inculturation by the Church of England can begin with a fixed view of the outward form of the local church' (Cray, 2006, p.67).

Croft discusses the way in which the threefold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon can be understood in a much more versatile and productive way if viewed as functions (oversight, sustaining and serving) which are to be shared by ordained and lay alike, rather than as functions that belong exclusively to certain office holders.

'...there is immense potential, flexibility and wisdom in the threefold patterning of ministry that we inherit from the New Testament tradition and the history of the churches: a pattern that can shed light on and help shape lay as well as ordained ministries in the Church today' (Croft, 2006, p.90).

Michael Moynagh, in another section of the volume, endorses the theme of wisdom, declaring that 'Wisdom can be learnt.'

'...we do not yet have adequate answers to many of these questions...We are in the midst of a prolonged period of experimentation and learning in which, through the sharing of wisdom, the Church as a whole is discovering what works well in which contexts. That is one reason why processes for accumulating

wisdom in fresh expressions are so important' (Moynagh, 2006, p. 124).²⁸

In a concluding chapter Croft commends the Lambeth Quadrilateral (interpreted in terms of commitments) as a reliable guide for the task of shaping the Church of England for the 21st Century, and adds a fifth commitment 'to the mission of God to the whole of creation and to the whole of our society as defined and described in the Anglican Communion's five marks of mission'²⁹ (Croft, 2006, p.182).

The context of anxiety about the future of the Parish System

Although the quotes I have cited do not speak directly of anxiety, there is a definite awareness in this volume of speaking to 'a Church that is beset by an endemic anxiety about the future...fed by an almost continual blizzard of prophecies of doom and decline' (Croft, 2006, p.viii)

In such a context PD offers a way of going out to meet the challenge, an action which enhances morale, as the research showed. Although Parish A had a hard time deciding what to do about its two churches, the process stimulated their determination to do what they could. For parishes D, E and F the very fact that people were invited to address the question of their future together enabled them to recognize the drawbacks of the current proposal, and to find an alternative way forward which they made to work because they played a significant part in choosing it.

Learning as discovery and choice rather than the product of teaching

Although these authors have many useful and constructive suggestions to make about the future of the parish system, my experience of PD encourages me to believe that most congregations are capable of seeing and

²⁸ I exchanged emails with Michael Moynagh after reading this chapter, declaring my interest in 'learning wisdom' and asking whether he had written anything else on wisdom, or knew of others treating this theme. Unfortunately he hasn't, and didn't.

²⁹ Croft lists the Five Marks in a footnote: 'To proclaim the good news of the kingdom; to teach, nurture and baptize new believers; to respond to human need by loving service; to seek to transform unjust structures of society; to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the earth.'

working out many of these things for themselves. When they do so, the commitment is all the greater. Let these ideas be made available as possibilities the congregation might choose or reject, but to suggest that these were the only or preferred options damages the morale and self confidence of the congregation. The heart of the matter is learning wisdom, which is not the same as following the wisdom of leaders. One of the current drawbacks to education and learning in the Church of England is the assumption, long embedded in practice, that the clergy are there to teach the laity and to decide for them. PD opens the possibility of both clergy and laity learning together through a genuine conversation of mutual respect.

3. PD, the Proposal, and Theological Issues in the Diocese of Blackburn

The proposal (p.155 above) is being actively pursued in Blackburn. This means that it has a specific context alongside a report entitled *The Shape of Things to Come*.³⁰ In a section devoted to Theology it gives the phrase ‘the royal priesthood of all the baptized’ considerable prominence. A key statement asserts ‘the nature of ordained ministry is to liberate the royal priesthood of all the baptized’ (Section 19.ii) while acknowledging that part of the problem is ‘a feeling on the ground that the work of the Church is primarily the work of the ordained’ (Section 51). The report goes on to question the idea that the local church is the parish: this has three drawbacks

- it makes no acknowledgement of the role of the Bishop,
- or of what is going on ‘a few miles down the road’
- or that the social situation has changed radically so that ‘local’ is now very different.

It pleads instead for a central role for the bishop, and stresses that we (all of us) are the diocese, and speaks of the changing nature of contemporary

³⁰ The report is available on the Blackburn Diocesan website at <http://www.blackburn.anglican.org/images/The%20Shape%20of%20Things%20to%20Come.pdf> accessed on April 5th 2013

society including the development of ‘more dynamic and in many cases non-geographical communities.’

In this context PD offers a way of working out the shape of things to come by providing a process of education, learning and decision making which potentially enables all concerned to participate. The theology with which PD needs to negotiate if it to be acceptable in Blackburn diocese concerns

collaborative ministry (this emphasized in a section of the report entitled Ministry)

the importance of the Bishop

parishes which are interdependent (can no longer ‘go it alone’)

being open to new kinds of community

which adds up to the conviction that ‘God calls us to mission.’ PD is well able to work within the parameters defined in this way.

Episcopal reactions

I have discussed the proposal in some detail with four Bishops in Blackburn, two of whom, though retired, have had some first hand experience of PD,³¹ while the other two are current suffragans.³² All of them expressed serious interest and enthusiasm for the proposal, and no theological objections were identified.

A priority for Bishops at the moment is finding workable solutions to the challenge of fewer clergy, recognizing that different parts of the diocese may need different solutions, but taking it for granted that this will be done within the normal parameters of Anglican ecclesiology, because there are legal requirements which more or less ensure this.³³ In this context, important words like wisdom, mission, community, development and the like are ‘open’ words which are able to be given meanings appropriate to the situation.

³¹ One retired Bishop attended a recent PD session in the parish in which he lives. The other was Chair of the Board which supervised my work in this area for seven years.

³² A new diocesan has been appointed but is not yet in post.

³³ The sphere of responsibility of an ordained person is defined fairly precisely by the system of Bishop’s Licenses. Although temporary flexibility is permitted any new long term arrangement would normally be licensed.

These Bishops all recognize the importance of negotiating practical solutions in preference to the use of legal authority to impose solutions. This is also associated with a recognition that the way in which the synodical system functions is often too adversarial to hold out much promise of overcoming 'nimbyism' (Section 187). The PD process of organized negotiation, which is not so dependent on advocacy or political power, means that in different contexts the authority of scripture, tradition, and reason - including hard facts of geography and finance - will quite properly play a significant role.

If a Bishop were to commend PD as a resource for addressing the challenge of fewer clergy to a fellow Bishop it would most likely be on the basis that it worked. That it should happen within the parameters of Anglican ecclesiology, embedded as they are within legal requirements, is likely to be taken for granted.

Conclusions: The nature of the theological task

The task of building up the Body of Christ is essentially practical and theological. The fruit of the Spirit is not doctrinal orthodoxy but a living faith embedded in the life of the Church. Anglican ecclesiology provides basic structures (e.g. a threefold ministry) and a context (England, with all its complex history), but the detail of how the work of the Church is actually organized has to be negotiated and renegotiated within these parameters for a changing world.

An important theological question concerns the part God plays relative to the part we play in all this. Most theological traditions are reluctant to answer such a question with any precision, for God is sovereign and may do whatever he or she chooses. Rowan Williams puts it thus:

'We are... bound to find ourselves in a degree of tension between what is needed to assure this representation, the patterns of public ministry that speaks for the continuity and integrity of the community's witness

through time, and the uncontrollable fertility of God's invitation and initiative' (Williams, 2006, p.59).

In practice, managing this 'degree of tension' belongs to wisdom, itself a gift of the Spirit. There is no certain formula for getting this right. Paul speaks of the 'fear and trembling' that is needed for the task (Phil. 2.12). PD takes place in a context of prayer and worship, of seeking and deliberation, in an attempt to discern the mind of Christ for this particular part of the Church. The difference, compared with how the Church of England has generally done these things to date, is that PD emphasizes the importance of the congregation. This is because the local church is essentially the congregation (which includes its vicar and its bishop), and not, to put it crudely, clergy with a congregation in tow.

Strengths and weaknesses of PD

The strengths of PD, as evidenced in the research, and in the dialogue with contemporary ecclesiology, include

- enabling the whole local church to participate in a process of becoming wiser by learning, (including deciding, choosing and negotiating) in order to re-organize itself within the parameters of the Church of England
- the absence of 'answers' to the questions to be addressed establishes the genuineness and honesty of the process
- the indirect, and therefore non-confrontational way in which opinions, feelings and convictions emerge enable participants to voice and to recognize rival purposes, outlooks and values
- the process is a way of developing the shared wisdom that contemporary theologians recognize as essential to a healthy ecclesiology
- the (long) time it takes is essential to adequate learning.

The weaknesses include

- its unfamiliarity, so that it does not yet appear as a natural choice
- the strength of the 'default' positions (e.g. 'clergy are paid to decide')

- impatience on the part of anxious people with a low tolerance of the 'not knowing' which is a crucial component of wisdom (and of all learning).

A paradox for PD, as for Anglican ecclesiology, lies in the lack of specific universal content (or precise definitions) for the concepts of wisdom, *koinonia* and *oikodome*. This lack, for PD, is because it insists that providing the content is the task of the local church. For Anglican ecclesiology the content lies partly in the wisdom yet to be learned, and partly in the inherited traditions with all their complexity.

PD as a resource for organizing the education and decision making required to face the challenge of fewer clergy neither threatens nor endorses any particular ecclesiology or theology of ministry. But it emphatically does not do this by implying that such things are irrelevant; they must play a part in the negotiations, but the part is not prescribed in advance. Should a negotiation enabled by PD threaten to cross Anglican boundaries (e.g. by a local church defying the authority of the Bishop) the issue will need addressing as it arises.³⁴

PD enables a decisive shift to be made in the assumptions and practices which determine the life of the local church. This movement is

from the static and fixed to the dynamic and flexible,
from a theology of specialists to the theology of a community,
from dependence on authority to local shared responsibility,
from the genius of the individual to the charism of the Body,
from a Christological ecclesiology to a pneumatological one,
from solution based to problem based;

all within an ongoing dialogue with scripture, tradition, reason and experience (where no one item in this list is accorded ultimate authority over the others) and in the context of worship.

³⁴ Such a case is currently ongoing in Sheffield: *Church Times* 22 February 2013.

Just as the content of wisdom is not to be judged by universal criteria but by local, specific and contextual ones, so the contribution that PD makes to the understanding of *koinonia* and *oikodome* is to insist that the wholesome development (*oikodome*) of a parish (a specific example of *koinonia*) is not content specific so much as process determined. Or, to reframe the same point as a criticism of common practice, any attempt to build up or develop the local church by the implementation of solutions devised by others damages the very nature of the *koinonia* it seeks to strengthen.

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